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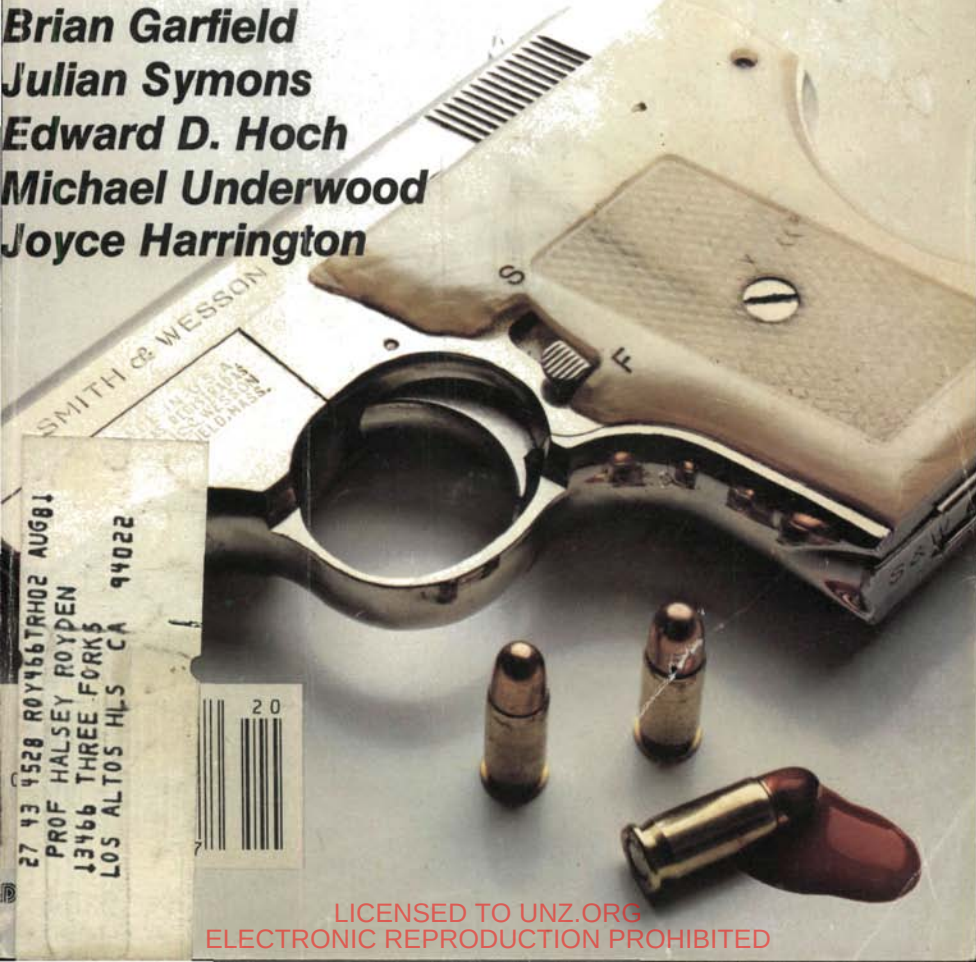

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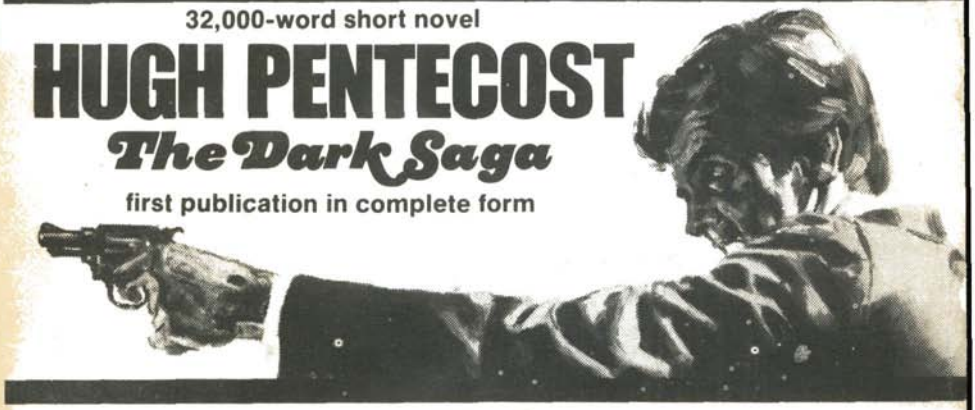

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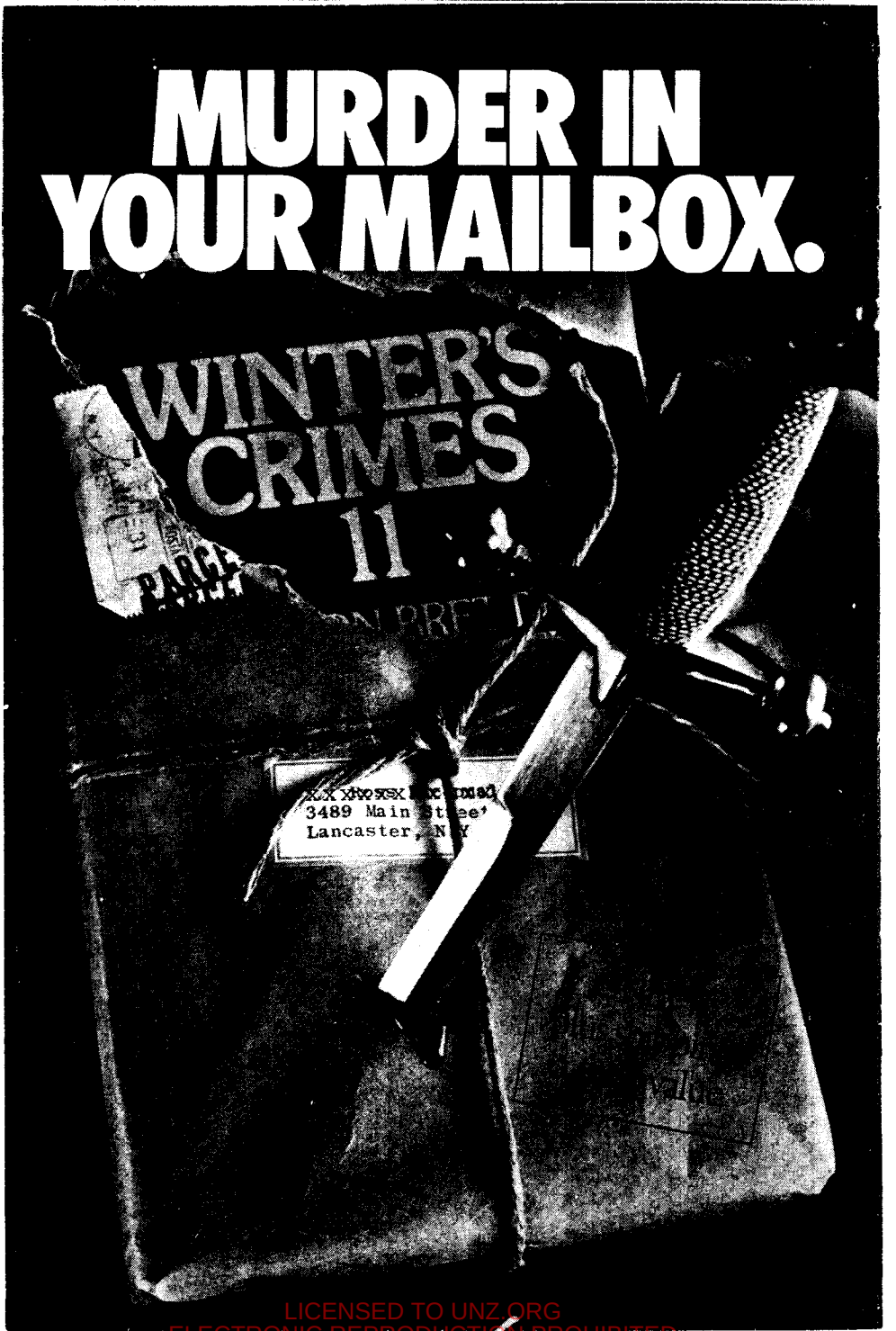

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a *NEW* short story by

BRIAN GARFIELD

A tragic accident can be a traumatic experience. But what of its aftermath? The anxieties, the tensions, the terror? And how much punishment for a crime is enough?

THE CHALK OUTLINE

by BRIAN GARFIELD

She wasn't even hurrying.

She turned the corner, driving sedately, and without warning the Murdochs' new puppy squirted into the lane like a seed popping from a squeezed lemon. Carolyn braked and turned, avoiding it, and that was when the little Murdoch girl, chasing the puppy, grenaded out from behind the hedge and it just wasn't possible to stop in time.

The lawyer's name was Charles Berlin. He had represented her in the divorce. He was the only attorney she'd ever dealt with. "This isn't my usual kind of case," he told her. "If you'd feel more comfortable with a criminal lawyer . . .?"

"Criminal?" She hadn't thought of it like that.

"Manslaughter's a crime," he said gently.

It took her a moment to absorb what he was saying. Her mind hadn't been tracking very well since it happened. "I'm sorry," she said, and shook her head as if to clear it.

"Don't get into the habit of saying that all the time," he said.

"What?"

"That's about the tenth time you've said 'I'm sorry' since you walked in here."

"I'm sor—" Then she nearly laughed.

He smiled at her. "That's better."

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He was a kind man; she'd appreciated that in him two years ago—he'd handled the divorce with grace and without abrasiveness. She tried to compose herself by sitting up straighter and tossing her hair back and glancing around the office as if to get her bearings. The room was like Charles's person—ordinary, matter-of-fact, quietly attractive. He was, she supposed, about five years older than she was—forty or so.

Carolyn said, "I just don't know what to do. What do you suggest?"

"I'll handle it if you like. I don't think it'll be difficult. Technically you've committed a crime but it obviously wasn't intentional. I hardly think they'll throw the book at you." And again the reassuring smile. It was the first time she'd ever noticed the dimple in his left cheek.

He was a comfortable and comforting sort of man: very low-key, but she supposed he'd cultivated that because a good many of his clients must be people who needed soothing.

He leaned back in his swivel chair with one leg crossed over the other knee, pivoting on the ankle, a yellow pad against the upraised knee and a pencil against his teeth. "Okay. Take it easy. I'm going to have to ask some direct questions. Ready?"

She dipped her head, assenting.

"Formally, then—you acknowledge that you ran down the child?"

She closed her eyes. She knew she'd have to force the words out sooner or later. It might as well be now.

"Yes. I killed the little girl."

It was all prearranged—an agreement between Charles and the State's Attorney. She was amazed how quickly it went, in the courtroom. She pleaded guilty to involuntary manslaughter. There were a few affidavits, and the judge—a surprisingly young but quite overweight woman—seemed less interested in the various depositions than in Charles's photographs of the scene of what Carolyn had finally been able to start calling The Accident (as opposed to The Day I Killed Amy Murdoch).

Charles pointed out the overgrown hedge in the photos and showed how it would have been impossible for *anyone* to have seen the little girl in time. He also pointed to the brief black skid marks that showed up clearly against the pale gray pavement; according to the police analysis they showed she couldn't have been doing more than twenty-five miles an hour at the time she saw Amy emerge into the street.

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(She'd been going faster than that but she'd already braked to avoid the dog.)

"In short," Charles summed up, "I think this incident represents a textbook example of an unavoidable accident. I would point out to your honor there wasn't any hit-and-run. Mrs. Benson stopped immediately and had the presence of mind to try and save the little girl's life. She called the police and the ambulance. She even went up to the Murdoch house and told Mr. Murdoch what had happened. I think this tragic incident must be chalked up as an act of God, your honor, and I think justice would be best served if Mrs. Benson were acquitted; but we recognize that a homicide *has* been committed and that may not be possible.

"My client is ready to accept whatever punishment this court decides to hand down, but I'd like to point out that in her own conscience she has already suffered far more than justice might demand of her. I suggest there were several victims of this horrible accident, your honor, and Mrs. Benson was one of them."

The judge lectured her a bit, had another brief look at the photos, agreed the accident had been clearly unavoidable, pointed out that under the laws of the state she had no choice but to find Carolyn guilty of involuntary manslaughter, and pronounced sentence: "Three hundred and sixty-four days. Sentence is suspended."

Charles had told her to expect just that. He'd explained what it meant, in practical terms: she'd have to report to a parole officer once a month—a formality—and she'd have to apply for the court's permission if she wanted to leave the state before the end of the year's period. She couldn't believe it was that simple. "You mean it's over? I can go?"

Getting up from the courtroom table he took her arm and gave her that smile. "All over. You've punished yourself enough."

It provoked a grunt from someone behind her. She didn't look back; she knew who it was. Stanley Murdoch. He'd been sitting at the prosecutor's table throughout the trial. He'd never said a word. He hadn't even looked at her very much. He didn't look enraged or even bitter; his face seemed rather slack, actually. But his presence in the room throughout the brief trial had disturbed her as if he were a ticking bomb.

Murdoch brushed past her without a word and strode out of the courtroom. Carolyn, feeling faint, reached for Charles's hand.

He took her to eat in one of those business-lunch places that was

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mostly bar, had no windows, and lulled you with Muzak. He bought her a drink and said, "I know a bit of how it feels. You feel as if you've been drugged. You're disoriented. Nothing's quite real. You don't know what's going to happen in your life tomorrow or next week or next year." Her hand was on the table and he touched it with his own. "I know it's hard to buy this idea at a time like this, but you will get over it. Life will resume."

She stared into the amber translucence of the drink. "I can't go on living three doors down from Stanley Murdoch. I couldn't stand him giving me those hurt accusing looks every time I passed by."

"The house is too big for you anyhow, by yourself. Why don't you move into an apartment? Buy one of those condominiums out by the lake shore."

"I'll think about it," she said listlessly.

She had an appointment that afternoon to help a fat woman in the Fairview tract choose carpeting and wallpaper. The fat woman's husband had got a raise and she wanted to do the house over and she'd gone through the Yellow Pages under "Interior Decorators and Designers"—Carolyn was the third decorator in the alphabetical listing and she had a suspicion that the fat woman probably had phoned the first two but got no answer.

She kept the appointment because she was still alert enough to realize she had to keep occupied. It was a tedious afternoon. The fat woman had poor taste and even so she couldn't make up her mind about anything. Carolyn tried to guide her into some sort of sensible combinations but her own aplomb was shattered and she didn't have her normal abilities to charm and persuade. Half of the time it was a chore merely to avoid screaming at the stupid cow.

Finally—line of least resistance—she let the fat woman have her way with some absurdly mismatched carpets that would clash dreadfully with the tweedy couch she had at home. Carolyn made a heroic effort, managed to summon one last feeble smile, said a hurried goodbye, and rushed away. Riding home in the back of the taxi—she still wasn't trusting herself to drive the car—she realized dismally that this wasn't going to work. Not right away. She didn't have the patience for it. One more appointment like this afternoon's and she'd start screaming her head off; she'd end up in a rubber room. There had to be some other focus for her attention, until these terrible anxieties and tensions began to settle down.

If they ever would . . .

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She had the furtive impulse to hide her face when the taxi took her past the hedge—past Murdoch's house. Defiantly she lifted her head, put her face close to the window, and looked at the house.

She wished she hadn't. He was there. Murdoch. Standing on the porch of the old house watching her ride past. He was not reading or smoking or drinking; he was not doing anything. He was simply standing there—watching her, and it was as if he'd been standing on that spot all afternoon waiting for her.

His face didn't change. He only watched. But she could feel the burning impact of his eyes all the time while she paid off the cab driver and hiked her bag over her shoulder and walked—as slowly and proudly as she could, but it was an effort not to run—up to her door. Then, absurdly, she couldn't find the key and spent *ages* rummaging in the damned bag.

When she finally eeled inside and pushed the door shut, she peered out through the crack. He was still there, diagonally across the street on his porch, watching, watching.

She pushed the door shut and locked it. Then she sagged against it, both palms hard against her temples, trying to keep from screaming.

. . . Back in the worst Medusan entanglements of the divorce (and admittedly it hadn't been terribly messy but there was no such thing as a non-traumatic divorce), she had discovered the wonderful therapeutic value of showers: a scalding hot one followed by a needle-sharp cold one. In some way that she understood but couldn't explain, the hard and meticulous scrubbing was a process that cleansed more than just the epidermic surface. It seemed to work this time too.

She emerged from the steamy bathroom with her wet hair wrapped in a turban of towel and stood before the dressing-room's full-length mirror squinting at her flushed body, skin still taut from the shower. "Not bad for an old broad," she said aloud—she was thirty-six. She thrust out one hip and tried a lewd grin but it broke up in the mirror and she turned away.

Fido came in while she was sitting naked in the dressing room moving the hair dryer around her head. He miaowed and rubbed against her calf and tickled her knee with his upthrust tail. She reached down to pet him and she could feel, through the fur, that he was not purring. Fido *always* purred, but not today. So the edge of her own vibrations must be reaching out that far.

Fido, she thought. What an absurd suburbanite's name for a cat.

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At the time—when Richard had brought the kitten home and suggested the name—she'd thought it was cute. Fido was fuzzy, black and white, with a sort of negative Chaplin face—all black except for a white smudge of mustache. He was affectionate, lazy, reasonably bright—a thoroughly ordinary cat but since the divorce he was all the family she had.

A screeching squeal of tires on pavement almost lifted the top of her head off. She raced through the bedroom to the window.

She was in time to see the tailfins of Stanley Murdoch's twenty-odd-year-old station wagon slither away past the hedge; then there was an angry flash of brake lights and another screech of tires, after which the car was gone around the bend.

Murdoch didn't normally drive like that. *He did it to frighten me.*

Rattled and distressed, she fixed something to eat—later she couldn't remember what it had been—and fed the cat and sat around in a housecoat, switching the TV on and off, picking up magazines and putting them down, thinking vaguely about getting dressed and walking the half mile down to the Mall to buy a pack of cigarettes. She'd given up smoking three years ago but at a time like this . . .

Don't be absurd.

A drink. That was it—that would calm her down. She went into the cupboard and selected among the half-dozen bottles: a Margarita, that would do the job. A good tall stiff one. She tried to remember Richard's Margarita ritual: split the lime, rub it around the rim of the glass, pour salt into the palm of the hand, and twirl the glass in it until the entire rim was coated with salt that adhered to the limejuice-wet surface. Then shove the salt-encrusted glass into the freezer to harden. Then mix the drink itself: tequila, triple sec, lime juice, ice cubes. Stir it for quite a while, to get it thoroughly cold. Then bring the glass out of the freezer.

Lick a bit of salt off the rim and drink . . .

The ritual was good because it occupied her. She was beginning to find some sort of equilibrium, beginning to feel even a bit pleased with herself. Then the jangling phone nearly made her drop the drink.

It was Charles Berlin. "I just wondered if you were getting along all right."

"I think so. It's sweet of you to call."

"I happened to be talking to another client of mine today and this is one of those wild coincidences but you remember we were talking about those condominiums out by the lake shore? Well, he's got one

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of them, and he's being transferred by his company down to Atlanta or Birmingham or someplace like that, and he asked me—the guy actually asked me this very afternoon—if I knew anybody who might be in the market to rent the place from him on a sort of sublet. He doesn't want to put it up for sale right away until he sees how he likes it down south, but he'll be gone at least a year. It's a nice pad. I've been there for dinner a few times. You'd like it. Shall I give you his name and number?"

She thought of Stanley Murdoch standing on the porch staring at her, and the screech—filled with message—of Murdoch's tires on the very patch of pavement where the little girl had died; and Carolyn said, "You bet."

By the time she signed the lease that Charles had prepared for her, on the condominium, she had recovered enough self-confidence to drive there herself with the carload of fragile things she didn't trust to the movers. She emptied the car, left the cartons in the apartment, and drove back to her house to pick up a few more things, and Fido. She'd have taken the cat on the first trip but of course he'd been nowhere in sight. She remembered one of Richard's wry sayings: "Cats are just like cops. Never around when you want 'em."

When she drove into the lane, Fido was there. Squashed flat on the same spot of pavement where Amy Murdoch had died.

"I know he did it on purpose."

"Murdoch?"

She gave Charles a look. "Who else?"

"Well, you'll never prove that, will you?"

"I *know* he did it. He wants revenge for his little girl. He won't stop until—"

"Until what? Until you've been punished enough? God knows you've had enough punishment from this thing. I think I'd better have a talk with Murdoch."

"If it'll do any good." She reached for the drink.

"I'll make the appropriate threats," Charles said drily. "Take it easy on that stuff—that's your fourth one."

"I didn't ask you to count my drinks."

"Yeah, I know. How about having dinner with me? I know a quiet place out past the lake."

"I don't go out with married men, Charles."

"We're separated."

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It took her a moment to absorb that. Then she squinted at him. "I'm in no shape to be made passes at."

"Your shape is just fine, Carolyn, but right now I'm disinclined to take unfair advantage of you. I think you need company right now, that's all."

"I don't want pity. I don't think I could deal with that."

"A friend's concern isn't pity."

"Oh, hell," she said, "take me to dinner. I hope it's not Chinese. Richard used to make awful little jokes about how they run out of chickens in Chinese restaurants and they send the cooks out into the alleys to round up cats."

"Your husband always had a macabre sense of humor, didn't he?"

"I'm sorry. I don't usually bring him into conversations like that."

"I understand. It's just that right now you haven't got any anchor at all and you keep reaching for memories to prop you up." Charles had very sincere warm eyes—brown eyes, nothing startling—and his hairline was starting to go, and there was too much flesh around too little chin, and he had a paunch and was only about five-eight and generally speaking he wasn't the sort of man she had fantasies about, but—

She said, "Right now you're a rope and I'm drowning, and I'm clutching at you like mad. Is that all right?"

"That's just fine. You see the secret truth is, I'm kind of lonesome myself. I've only been separated a few months."

"I always despised lawyers," she said. "They feed on people's misery. They stir up friction. It's their job to treat everything as an adversary procedure—they're in the business of creating enemies. I've hated lawyers ever since my father was defrauded of his dry-cleaning business by some clever loophole-bending gangster lawyer. So you will pardon me, I hope, if I sometimes seem a bit distant with you. I'm not used to thinking of a lawyer as anything but loathsome."

It only made him smile. "Is that how you thought of me when I was handling your divorce? Loathsome?"

"I regarded you as a necessary evil, I guess."

"Most people think of lawyers like that."

"Do they?"

"We are the lowest form of life, with the possible exception of interior decorators."

"Now you're making fun of me."

"Yeah, I am. You need it."

"I do," she said. "Thank you."

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"Do that again."

"What?"

"Dimple up. Smile."

But she didn't. She suddenly remembered the cat again.

She made herself go out into the world and behave as if there were a tomorrow and it mattered. She had to pick up several bolts of fabric for one client and work with the upholsterer on angling the pattern of the fabric properly for the furniture it was to cover; she had a doctor's waiting room to do in the new Medical Center court, and there were three messages left over from last week from the answering service. She returned all three calls, belatedly; two of the people had found other decorators. She made an appointment for Friday with the third.

But she kept thinking about Fido. It wasn't that she'd been inordinately fond of the cat; she hadn't—she wasn't that crazy about cats, really—but the cat had been the nearest thing to a child she'd had, and Murdoch had killed it deliberately.

Deliberately.

That was what frightened her.

She tried to get used to living in an apartment. Actually, since she was alone, it was quite roomy—two bedrooms (she set up her office in one) and a spacious terrace. It was on the second floor. It didn't exactly overlook the lake but if you leaned out over the railing of the terrace you could see a corner of the lake. The view mainly was of the country-club golf course, which was pleasant if overgroomed. Most of the golfers were overweight types who got their exercise in electric carts. She'd never had any interest in golf but being on the fifteenth hole was pleasant enough. She kept expecting a golf ball to come whizzing in through a windowpane, but nothing like that happened.

What did happen was that someone drew a chalk outline of a sprawled little girl's body on the floor of the hallway just outside her door.

It looked exactly like the outline of Amy Murdoch that the police had chalked on the asphalt lane.

"I talked to him again," Charles told her over the phone. "Of course he says he doesn't know anything about it. He'd say that whether it was true or not, but it makes it hard to pin anything down. You know it *could* just be some awful brat who read about

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the case in the newspaper." The photograph of the chalked outline on the lane had appeared on an inside page of the paper. Carolyn remembered it and made a face.

She said into the phone, "I don't think it was just some little kid."

"Well, we can't prove it was Murdoch. I can't go around threatening him with legal action when we haven't got any evidence against him. We'd look pretty silly in court asking for a restraining order and watching his lawyer get up and say, 'Restrain from what?' "

"I know," she said wearily. "It's not your fault." But at least his voice had calmed her down enough so that she was able to go out into the hall with the mop and clean the chalk drawing off the floor.

Next day she received in the mail a copy of a children's magazine. It was the kind that was aimed at little girls the age Amy Murdoch had been—six, seven, eight. Full of cheery cartoons of fuzzy smiling animals. It had one of those addressograph-printed labels, with her name on it and the new address. Obviously a subscription had been taken out in her name.

In the next few days her mailbox began to fill up to the point of engorgement with magazines, newspapers, comic books, even cheap pornographic material—the kind that actually did come, she saw, in plain brown-paper wrappers.

Then the bills for all the subscriptions began to come in.

"Just write 'Please cancel subscription' on the forms and send them back," Charles told her. "Don't get rattled. He wants you to get rattled. Don't give him the satisfaction."

"For God's sake, Charles, I don't need avuncular advice. I need to have him *stopped*."

"I can't prove he's the one who's doing it. Neither can you."

"Talk to him anyway. Threaten him. Please?"

Finally a golf ball *did* come through the window. It was the bedroom window—which overlooked the parking lot, not the golf course—and it was in the middle of the night, when nobody could possibly have been playing golf. It made a hell of a noise; she thought she'd have a heart attack.

Wrapped around the golf ball and tied with a rubber band was a crumpled copy of that newspaper photo of the chalk outline on the pavement.

Trembling, she went into the kitchen, lit a gas ring on the stove, and set fire to the bit of newsprint. She watched it curl up and turn

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black, and wished it were Murdoch.

In the morning she called Charles at his office but the secretary told her Charles was out of town until Monday.

She went around the apartment half of the morning, pacing aimlessly, the hard leather heels of her shoes clicking angrily on the floor like dice. By noon she was distraught enough to think about having a drink, but she didn't. Instead she went down to the machine in the lobby and for the first time in three years bought a pack of cigarettes. A folder of matches came with it. The elevator had a big "No Smoking" sign, but she lit up anyway before she'd even got out of it.

She drew a deep chestful of smoke and it nauseated her and made her instantly, terrifyingly dizzy; she nearly fell to the floor, and had to lean with both hands on her doorknob until the wave of sick dizziness passed. She went inside, stumbled to the bathroom, threw the burning cigarette in the toilet, threw the pack of cigarettes in the wastebasket, leaned both arms against the sink, and stood there, head down, until she was sure she wasn't going to throw up. Then she looked up into the medicine-cabinet mirror.

Go ahead. Go to pieces. Fall apart.

"The hell," she said aloud. "It's just what he wants me to do. I'll be damned if I'll give him the satisfaction."

She found the golf ball where she'd thrown it into the bedroom wastebasket. Feeling cold and angry and determinedly calm now, she put the golf ball in her handbag and went downstairs to the parking lot. It was nearly one o'clock. Murdoch would be home for lunch, probably. He sold real estate in a crummy office out west of town but he usually came home for lunch every day. The housekeeper prepared it for him and always had it ready for him when he arrived, which usually was at about 1:15.

Murdoch was a widower, a very close-mouthed man although not normally a surly one—he had a salesman's hearty but insincere graces, although his gift of gab was one he saved up for customers and rarely displayed in his home neighborhood. Richard had invited him over once or twice in the old days but he'd been a singularly boring dinner guest and after a while their only contact with Murdoch was an occasional wave from the car as one or another of them went in or out—or a shared beer now and then on Sundays when both Richard and Murdoch would be out mowing the lawns. Murdoch's life had mostly been wrapped up in his little girl; his wife had died of leukemia quite young, when Amy was only two or

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so—several months before Richard and Carolyn had moved in.

Basically her relationship with Murdoch had always been distant—cordial enough, but indifferent. About three months after the divorce Murdoch had made a sort of half-hearted and apparently dutiful gesture of inviting her out to dinner, explaining in a toe-in-the-dust aw-shucks way that since the two of them were the only singles in the whole neighborhood it was almost incumbent on them to go out together. But she'd found some excuse to decline the invitation and he hadn't asked a second time.

He was physically unpleasant; she found him nearly repulsive, although she knew women who liked his type—he was muscular enough, a *macho* character with huge arms and a big chest and a military sort of crew-cut, flat on top. He had a beer-drinker's gut and the hands of a mountain gorilla; he looked more like a heavy-equipment mechanic than a realtor.

Mainly he sold small pre-war houses, in rundown areas, to blue-collar workers and their families. Presumably he looked to them like the kind of man they could trust. The word around the neighborhood was that his realty operation was a bit on the shady side—something to do with kickbacks to building inspectors and bribes to government mortgage people. Nobody had ever proved anything against Murdoch but he had just a slight unsavory aura. In any case, she had always thought him unattractive, to say the least. But up to the time of Amy's death she had not thought of him as *menacing*.

Now, however, there was clearly no question but that he was executing a deliberate and careful scheme of harassment against her. Revenge for Amy's death.

When she turned the car into the lane Murdoch's semi-antique Chevy station wagon was in the driveway. Good; it meant he'd come home for lunch. Carolyn got out of the car and walked halfway up the walk toward the Murdoch porch. It was one of those old clapboard places with the porch running around three sides of the house. Part of it, on the left side, was screened in as a sleeping porch. The rest had a little picket-fence type railing which was turning gray in patches and needed paint.

She fumbled in her handbag a moment and then looked up. Nobody was in sight. She gave the golf ball a good strong throw. It made a satisfying noise when it crashed through Murdoch's front window.

And it brought him boiling out of the place, as she'd thought it

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would. "Damn irresponsible kids—" he was roaring; then he recognized her and his face froze and he went absolutely still.

She spoke up in a clear strong voice. "I've had enough harassment from you. I'm sorry, very sorry, about what happened to Amy and I wish I could make it up to you. I know you don't understand this, or believe it, but I feel nearly as bad about it as you do. But I've had enough. Harassing me won't bring her back to you—you ought to know that. Now you've had your revenge and you've had your satisfaction and you've made me feel absolutely rotten all these weeks, and now I want you to stop it. Do you understand? Stop it!"

He hadn't said a word; he still didn't. His eyes narrowed down to slits and he merely watched her, unblinking. But she saw that one fist slowly clenched and unclenched. It kept doing that, with a terrible slow rhythm, closing and opening.

He didn't respond to her words at all. She looked at the massive strength of him and felt appalled by her own temerity but, just the same, she stepped forward—five paces, six, seven—until she was nearly nose-to-nose with him, and she shouted in his face with blind thundering rage: "Leave me alone, Murdoch! Do you hear me? *Leave me alone!*" And she slapped him, as hard as she could, across the face.

He didn't even move. He was like some sort of immutable granite rock.

She stood trembling, hyperventilating; she raised her arm again, to strike him, but he stirred then. It was as if he didn't even see her threatening rising arm. He merely turned slowly on one heel and walked back up the steps to the porch.

She screamed at his back: *"Did you hear me, Murdoch?"*

He didn't answer. He just disappeared inside; the screen door slapped shut behind him.

Lacking the courage to follow him into his house, she was forced to turn away and get in the car. She sat trembling for quite a while. She kept expecting to see his face at a window but he never appeared. Finally she drove off.

The phone: Charles. "Hi. I'm sorry I've been out of touch. I was out of town."

"That's what your secretary said."

"I, uh, hell, this is awkward. Look, my wife and I—we've, uh, well, we're going to give it another try. We're trying for a reconciliation. For the sake of the kids, you know, and—well, we've been together

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a long time, nearly twenty years now. A lot of shared experience there. A lot of understanding. I think we may make it. I know it doesn't usually work out, but we want to give it a try. I thought I'd better tell you . . ."

"I understand, Charles. Don't worry about me."

"Are you all right? No more trouble with Murdoch, I hope."

"He made a little trouble. I had it out with him today. I don't know if it will do any good, but at least it gave me the satisfaction of telling him off."

"That was a gutsy thing to do. What did he say?"

"Nothing. Maybe he's just chewing on what I said, thinking about it. Maybe something of what I said penetrated that little pea brain of his. I don't know. It's hard to tell. Anyhow he didn't do or say anything nasty."

"Well, maybe that's a good sign."

"Maybe. I hope so. Listen, Charles?"

"Yes?"

"I wish you good luck and every happiness. I mean that."

"I know you do. You're a damn good person, Carolyn."

"Goodbye."

She went to bed and hugged the pillow to her; she felt acutely alone tonight. *I have got to get out in the world*, she told herself with force, *and start making friends again*. This was ridiculous. She was a healthy thirty-six-year-old woman without any entangling attachments or encumbrances; she was no beauty but she was reasonably attractive in her chunky short-waisted way—after all, there were men who *liked* freckles and big chests on their women—and it was idiotic to confine herself in this kind of self-pitying isolation; there was no need for it.

Tomorrow, she resolved, she'd start making phone calls. Even if it made her look like some sort of shameless wanton.

She fell asleep filled with determination; she awoke filled with the harsh scent of smoke. She couldn't place it at first but then she coughed and tried to breathe and coughed again, choking.

The apartment was on fire.

The red glow flickered through the living-room doorway. She leaped out of the bed, flung the window open, and climbed out onto the narrow ledge. It was merely a decorative brick escarpment but it gave her purchase for her bare feet; she held onto the window sill and yelled for help.

It was only a one-story drop and finally, when the heat and smoke

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got too much for her, she jumped to the lawn below, managing to hit the grass without breaking anything. The fire engines were just arriving—she heard the sirens and saw the lights and then it was all a welter of men and machines and hoses and terrible smells.

By morning half of the building was gutted but the fire was out, and she was taken, along with a dozen other displaced tenants, to City Medical to make sure there were no serious injuries.

The fire apparently had started in the furnace room immediately below her apartment and had come up the air ducts, spreading through the building; the hottest part of it had attacked her apartment and it was there that the worst damage had been done, both by the fire and by the tons of water that had been used to extinguish it. The superintendent was a skinny little Italian man with sad compassionate eyes who kept shaking his head back and forth like a metronome. "I'm sorry but it's a total loss. You'll want to get in touch with the owner about the insurance, of course, but I doubt that will cover your own personal things. Were you insured?"

"No."

"Too bad, Miss. I am very sorry. If there's anything at all I can do—"

"You've been very kind. I think I want to sleep a while." He went, and she thought vaguely, in song-like rhythm, *Sorry-sorry-sorry-sorry . . .*

She took a room in a residential hotel. Furnished. With daily linen and maid service. She bought a few clothes, enough to get by. She thought of moving to some other city.

Charles seemed very distant. He lent her money but not a shoulder to cry on; she could understand that but she *needed* a shoulder and resented his not providing one. All he said was, "Try not to persuade yourself that Murdoch set the fire. If he didn't, you'd be making an unjust accusation. If he did, you'll never prove it. Either way it's no good torturing yourself."

She was walking home from a solitary supper trip to the delicatessen when a car came up on the curb behind her at high speed. She heard it—she'd always had acute hearing—and dived flat against the display window of a furniture store, and the car swished past her, inches away. It was a shadowed place in the middle of the block and the car wasn't running with any lights on, but she saw its silhouette vaguely in the darkness as it roared off and it looked like an old car. An old station wagon, with tailfins.

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It had damn near killed her. She had that thought and then she crumpled and sat on the pavement for quite a while before she regained strength enough to walk.

Go to the police? And tell them what?

Call Charles? No, he's got other things on his mind now.

Move away. Nothing to hold her here any more. No real ties here. Go away. California maybe. Back to Illinois. New York. What difference did it make? Just get away from that madman.

That was it, then. Run. Run away.

And let him think he's won?

She watched him get out of the old station wagon, lock it, put a cigarette in his mouth, and light up. Then he turned and began to walk across the wide parking lot toward the low square stucco building that housed his realty office.

She let him get halfway across the parking lot. Right out in the open. Then she put her car in gear.

"Sorry, Murdoch," she muttered. "Sorry, sorry, sorry. It was an accident. I just couldn't help it. I'm sorry."

And she ran him down.

"Q"

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THE DUBBING CLUE

by LIONEL BOOKER

"It's an art in itself. Not every actor can do it."

Leonard Productions specialized in providing English dubbing for foreign films, and Andy Simoney had written and directed over a hundred such dubbings in almost every known language. He was a good friend of mine from back home and he knew times were hard for me since I had come to New York from the army, so he arranged for me to audition at the studio.

"You have to hit the right lip movements," he explained to me as we sat in his tiny cubicle with a moviola before us. From over the partition on our left, where another writer was working, came the piercing screech of Godzilla while to the right was the echoing gunfire from an Italian western.

Andy turned on his own moviola, a console machine which runs film before your eyes from a six-inch screen at any speed or in any direction you wish. A scene from an Italian movie came on, showing a close-up of a man who shrugged and said quietly but distinctly, *"Va bene."*

"Va bene means a lot of things in Italian," Andy continued, "but in this case it's an expression of resignation, a sloughing off of disappointment. One fricative—the 'v' sound—and one labial—'b.' Since the guy starts the phrase with his mouth open, and generally

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we all open our mouths slightly to take a breath before speaking, a good fit is 'Never mind'."

He shut off the sound and ran the clip again. I saw how well the substitute worked.

"I had no idea it was so precise."

Andy shrugged and shut off the machine. "Well, nothing can make it perfect. After all, no language conforms to another exactly, but we still get a lot of criticism from art buffs who say they prefer subtitles. Half the time the film they think they are hearing in its original language is dubbed because the cast is international and speaking all kinds of languages on the set."

"Why is it the voices you use sometimes sound so studied, so uninteresting?"

Andy rose and gathered up some papers. "As I say, most actors can't do it. The majority of the ones we use are announcers and radio people because they seem more comfortable working with just their voices alone. And they're more precise about hitting the lip movements. I've seen experienced stage and television people go to pieces when they try it."

He tossed the remnants of his lunch into a waste basket and led me out of the cubicle.

"Take the three we're using today," he went on as we emerged into the hallway and began to pass the doors to the recording studios. "All of them are from the golden days of radio. Maybe you remember them. Sam Fields, Jessica Thornton, and Herb Layton."

"Remember them?" I asked incredulously. "Didn't you ever own a radio as a kid?" He smiled tolerantly, aware of my penchant for what is erroneously called "trivia."

"During the day Jessica Thornton was the object of desire of half the leading men in soap operas while at night she was continually being menaced, terrified, and done in by a variety of lunatics and monsters on the horror shows. Her assailant was usually played by Sam Fields who, in real life, was married to her."

"And still is," added Andy as we turned into Studio C.

Before us was the control room where the director and the technicians operated the complex equipment that recorded the dubbing. On the left wall as you came into the control room was a large window, about three feet high and six feet long, that looked into the actual recording area.

Before the window was a long table with microphones and control boards and on the right side of the room were the large taping

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machines that stretched from the floor to the low ceiling.

As we entered I noticed an open door directly to the left of the entrance that revealed a small narrow anteroom which acted as a sound buffer between the control room and the recording room. Here, in dim light, actors could relax without disturbing the work going on in the other areas. Proceeding into the anteroom you had only to turn right to find the door to the recording room where the actual dubbing went on.

Through the glass in the control room I saw that the recording room was a fairly small area, lined with soundproofing panels. There were some script-stands in one corner, with tiny lamps over them, and a large screen set directly across from the control-room window. A projector, in a room above the control room, shot the image onto that screen. One thing that didn't particularly interest me at the time but became vitally important later was that you could see the entrance door of the recording room through the control-room window. People who went into the anteroom just suddenly appeared in the recording room later.

Andy set his papers on the long table and asked me with an amused smile, "What do you know about Layton?"

"Only that he came to radio from his nightclub act where he imitated everyone in show business and politics. I used to love his show, 'Call for Murder,' which featured a different mystery every week with Layton playing all the parts. The solution was left open at the end when he would pick out a telephone number and call, asking the listener if he knew who the murderer was. I always knew but he never called me. The prize was fifty dollars which was a fortune in those days."

"We went to a hundred before the show went off the air," said a familiar voice behind me and I spun around to see a tall grey-haired man with a flabby, jovial face. I suddenly realized why Andy had smiled when he asked me about Layton, but I never would have connected this elderly, somewhat stiff-jointed figure with the voice from my boyhood.

"And you had to send us a postcard if you expected us to call you," he went on, chuckling.

"I always thought you wrote those cards yourself." Layton stepped aside to reveal a small fragile woman with a gentle manner. "I sent you one but you never called *me*," she said smiling.

"Not about the mystery anyway," Layton answered, still joking but with a tinge of bitterness.

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"Someone's smoking in here," came a raspy voice behind Jessica Thornton. A small bald-headed man with heavy, horned-rimmed glasses appeared and frowned in my direction.

"Now, Sam—" began Jessica, but Sam Fields ignored her and refused to enter the room, his wrinkled face twisted in disapproval.

"You know how I feel about that," he snapped at Andy, as if Andy had induced me to light up a cigar just to annoy Fields. I hastily put it out with a murmured apology.

Layton shook his head at Jessica. "How have you stood it all these years, Jess?"

"I generally leave the room if I want to smoke," she answered somewhat defiantly.

"You wouldn't have to if you gave up those damned things," Fields said in what I was now convinced was a chronic snapping tone. "Well, why don't we get started?" he asked Andy as the sound technician and Diane, Andy's assistant, entered the control room.

"Okay. We've just got forty more loops and we're done. We did most of the script before lunch."

Fields grunted and went into the anteroom. Layton let out a sigh and was about to speak when Jessica wheeled on him and said in a voice of anger that surprised us all.

"Not another word, Herb! I won't hear anything against him!"

Layton flushed and stared at the floor. Through the connecting plate glass I could see Fields turn on the small lamps over the script-stands. His irritated and irritating voice came over the intercom loudspeaker that connected the two rooms.

"Well, what are we waiting for?"

Andy pressed a button and the recording room went pitch-dark except for the little lamps that illuminated the large type on the dubbing script which helped the actors read their lines in such poor visibility. Layton beckoned Jessica with a rigid arm to precede him into the anteroom, and after they had closed the door behind them I whispered to Andy, "Are they always that way?"—feeling the acute disappointment of a small child who has now grown up and seen how human his idols actually are.

"You don't have to whisper. They can't hear us. The key is open on their side, so they can talk to us. If I want to communicate with them I have to push this button."

I looked at the control board, amazed at its confusing array of dials and switches. Diane sat before a large notebook which contained a copy of the dubbing script filled with penciled notations.

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The tape operator crossed to his machines and waited. At Andy's signal the projectionist began to run some film on the screen.

It afforded a little more light in the recording room but still nothing was discernible except the script-stand lamps. A flickering and momentary glow against the window on the left indicated that the anteroom door had opened and closed to admit Layton and Jessica.

"We'll start with Herb and Jessica," said Andy over the intercom. "Sam, sit this one out."

An image appeared on the screen showing a young girl of about twelve and an elderly man, speaking to each other in Italian. It lasted for a few seconds and then the screen went black. Andy had already explained to me that the dialogue portions of the film had been cut into small segments, hardly ever over thirty seconds. These pieces of film were made into loops that continually revolved in the projector, playing over and over again with a short space of black between the end and the beginning of the scene. This black period allowed the director to give instructions as to readings and lip synchronization.

"Jessica, this is where the little girl has to say goodbye to her grandfather. She's very sad. Herb, the old man is trying not to show his feelings but he's also upset."

"Got it," said Herb's voice.

"How heavy should I be?"

"Start slow, Jessica. She goes on for six loops, so it has to build."

The short scene appeared again but this time there was no sound. Over the intercom I could hear a cracked old voice and a high-pitched childish one mumbling in turn, timing the written English dialogue to the film actors' lips.

"All set?" asked Andy when the scene ended again.

"Let's go."

"Make it a take."

"Loop Five-Oh-Four," said Diane into the mike as the tape began to roll on the recorders behind me. "Take One."

The voices didn't "sync" exactly on the first take but I was amazed at how close they came. And with full emotional content despite what must have been a grueling concern for the mechanics.

"Jessica, stretch out the middle," instructed Andy during the black period. "Herb, hit that labial in 'goodbye' harder and emphasize the last three words."

And so it went, as I sat there in awe and admiration. Andy would even rewrite during the loop breaks, sometimes changing, adding,

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or omitting words when the original English dialogue was found not to fit the film actors' lips. Each rewrite was accomplished perfectly in performance without a hint of difficulty.

"That takes care of that sequence," said Andy. "The next is just Herb and Sam, Jessica. Have a smoke and relax."

"I'll have it in the anteroom." Even over the intercom I could detect a note of resignation.

"Good idea," said Sam's voice.

A slight glow on the window glass indicated the door had been opened and closed. This was followed by the sound of Sam clearing his throat.

"The next loops are the brothers," said Andy as an image of two young Italians flashed on the screen. Herb's crackling old rasp disappeared and both he and Fields seemed to shed thirty years in their voices which came out as young and vibrant.

After four or five loops the door glow appeared on the window again.

"Who's that?" asked Andy over the intercom. "Jessica?"

"No," said Herb's voice. *"The door must have flown open."*

"Well, close it up. It interferes with the screen."

"I'll get it, Sam. You stay there."

"Okay."

The dubbing continued for another five minutes when the glow reappeared.

"For Pete's sake!" Andy growled.

"I'll get it," said Herb's voice.

"Damn," cried Andy. "I want to get this sequence done or we'll be behind schedule." He turned to me. "Do me a favor and go into the anteroom and hold it shut. And tell Jessica we'll need her in a few minutes."

"Okay."

The loop flashed on the screen again as I opened the door to the anteroom. Halfway in I stopped because in the dim light I could see Jessica Thornton lying on the floor with her head crushed in. Beside her was a long metal rod covered with blood which was still wet and looked black and oily in the glow of the dim bulb.

I felt sick and walked slowly back into the control room, trying to catch my breath as I announced the news. For some reason I whispered it to Andy as if fearful of spoiling the take. He rose immediately, telling Diane to halt the dubbing for a minute. His voice sounded bewildered, as if he was trying to decide if I was

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playing a joke on him; but I saw my own horror reflected in his face as he stared down at the broken body, sprawled halfway between the two doors. There was no question that she was dead, but his expression gave way to total incomprehension as he glanced around the tiny shoebox of a room. Then it changed to one of apprehension and disbelief as we walked into the recording room.

I had been as unprepared at finding the body as I was by the reaction from Herb Layton when we told him and Fields of Jessica's death. For a moment both men just stood there before their script-stands in the now lighted recording room and gaped at us stupidly. Then, as Fields's face began to twist with sadness, Layton wheeled on him, screaming with rage.

"You killed her!" He leaped at Fields who backed away in surprise. Andy and I held onto Layton who continued to scream, tears falling down his cheeks. "And you had *me* help you! I helped you kill her!"

"Are you crazy?" cried Fields, his show of grief overcome by his fear of Layton.

"It was supposed to be a joke!" Layton blubbered at us as we relaxed our grip. "He suggested it to me before we got back from lunch. 'Let's have a laugh on Andy,' he said. He knew I could imitate his voice, so he had me record some of the loops, doing both parts while he left the recording room. Then, as soon as you said it was fine, he would pop out and confront you with the gag."

He turned back to Fields, his voice now low and filled with hate. "I wondered why you came back into the recording room without going through with it all. Now I know. You went into that anteroom to kill her while I covered for you! You killed her because you found out about us! You knew she was going to leave you for me!"

"You're out of your mind!" cried Fields. "I don't know what you're talking about! I never left this room! And neither did you!"

"One of them is the greatest liar I ever heard," said Lieutenant Moran of the Homicide Squad as he went over the whole thing with Andy and me later in the control room.

Poor Diane had been so upset they let her go home, and the recording technician and the projectionist had been so intent on operating their machines that they could add nothing as witnesses. However, we could all corroborate each other's statements that none of us left the control room or went through the door into the anteroom, which was also the only way the projectionist could have got in there if he had left his booth.

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"And you say you saw nobody hiding in the anteroom before the session started?" Moran asked us.

"That's right," said Andy. "The same goes for the recording room. It was empty. The rooms are so sparse there's really nothing for anyone to hide behind."

"Then it had to be either Layton or Fields who crept out of the recording room in the dark and killed her. Could Layton have done it during those two times you noticed the anteroom door open?"

Andy shook his head. "It was only for a few seconds. Hardly enough time for anyone to sneak up on a woman and bash her head in. Besides, there was always the danger she'd make a sound that we'd hear if the door was open."

"Okay," sighed Moran. "So Mrs. Fields goes into the anteroom and closes the door. It opens once briefly and is closed. Then it opens again and is closed before Mr. Booker here gets up and goes in to find the body. During all this time you can clearly hear what sounds like the voices of Mr. Layton and Mr. Fields in the recording room."

"Don't forget the weapon," Andy reminded him. "It also came from the recording room." Moran looked at him puzzled. "That rod is a sort of paperweight. You lay it along the base of the script-stand to hold the pages flat. It's usually left there when the recording room isn't in use."

Moran nodded. "It seems that Layton's explanation is the only reasonable one."

"Does Sam still deny it?"

"Yeah. He says he never suggested a joke to Layton and that neither of them left the recording room. If he's guilty he's relying on the fact that it's only Layton's word against his, even though the crime seems impossible otherwise and Fields has the only motive."

Moran rubbed his chin and looked annoyed. Finally he turned to Andy and spoke confidentially. "Mr. Simoney, I want to try something. Both of you only heard the voices over an intercom. I want you to play back the tape Layton and Fields supposedly made after Mrs. Fields left the room. See if you can tell if it's both men's actual voices or Layton imitating Fields."

Andy threaded the tape through the machine and we sat there, hearing the distinct voices and trying to decide. Some of the voice changes came quickly but there were no overlaps.

"It's beyond me," said Andy as he turned off the recorder. "It certainly sounds like Fields but he's doing a character voice, so I can't be sure."

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"Then let's get Layton in here," ordered Moran to one of his men. He faced us again. "If he could do it once, he should be able to do it again."

Although Layton was still upset he welcomed the chance to prove his story. Instead of having him repeat all the loops, Andy selected the most difficult ones that featured both voices. Layton stood at the script-stand and amazed us all by not only imitating Fields perfectly but also managing to synchronize the lip movements of both film actors.

"He's even got the right pitch Sam would use for that character," said Andy. "I can't hear any difference."

Moran nodded and rose. "Well, thank you. All I can do now is take them down to the station and keep grilling them until one of them cracks. But it looks bad for Fields."

It was evening now and I suggested to Andy that we have dinner together. It was a subdued meal with both of us thinking of the events of the day.

Suddenly, over coffee, Andy seemed to come to a decision and abruptly suggested we go back to the studio.

The guard in the lobby had us sign in and we took the service elevator to the now deserted hallway. Once we got back to Studio C, Andy rethreaded the day's recordings while I stared at the empty rooms where it had all taken place so short a time ago.

"What's the idea?" I finally asked him.

"Something that I want to check," he answered cryptically and began to play the tape. When we got to the point where Layton claimed he was alone in the studio imitating Fields's voice, he started to slow down the speed. He came to a point where Layton's voice ended a sentence and Fields's voice (supposedly) began another one.

"There's only a split second between them," I said. "But no overlap, and Layton did it at the same speed when we tested him."

"Shh," Andy whispered as he rewound this section of the tape and played it back at a painfully slow revolution, turning the volume up to full. Now Layton's voice was merely a thunderous rumble, hardly resembling anything human. As it approached the sentence ending I began to hear what I took to be interference at first. Then I realized it wasn't static but a long constant rasp, like a violent windstorm under Layton's rumble. I looked quizzically at Andy and saw a glint of triumph in his eyes.

"Remember I told you how we all usually open our mouths before

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we speak? What you're hearing is Sam taking in a slight breath of air before Layton *finishes* talking."

"But—" My own voice failed me for a moment and then I blurted out, "That means Layton was lying! Both men were in the recording room when Jessica was killed!"

We stared at one another, unable to explain the implications of this discovery.

Why had Layton lied? Who killed Jessica?

"You know," I finally said. "this is like those mysteries Layton did every week on radio. Up until now all I could remember were those horror shows where Jessica was repeatedly killed by Fields. Most radio programs of that type like to show women in danger a lot of the time, and that's why Layton was so fantastic. Since he played all the characters on 'Call for Murder,' he had to do female voices as well as male."

Andy continued to sit there in silence. I leaned forward. "We've only considered the possibility that Jessica was going to leave Fields because she was in love with Layton, but suppose it was exactly the opposite? Suppose she resisted Layton's overtures and refused to break up her marriage? Isn't it a perfect revenge to kill the woman who spurned you and frame her husband for the murder?"

I leaned back and paused for a long moment, our eyes never leaving each other's.

"Jessica never entered that recording room after lunch," Andy continued for me. "Layton killed her as soon as he got her alone in the anteroom where nobody would hear her cry out."

"And with the rod he had taken off the script-stand that morning and hid in his sleeve. Remember his stiff arm as he beckoned her in."

Andy nodded. "He waited until the recording room was dark and then entered it alone, leaving her dead body behind him. During the opening loops he did his own voice and Jessica's child-voice. He knew what order we'd follow after seeing the script in the morning. Then he faked her exit into the anteroom to have a smoke, and later opened the anteroom doors twice to make it look like Fields could have gone into the anteroom and killed her."

"You've got to hand it to him. It took nerve. At any time one of us might have gone into that anteroom while he was making us believe Jessica was in the recording room. He even took a chance Sam might have accidentally overlapped his voice during the time he claimed to be imitating him."

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We didn't do anything right away. First we decided to confirm our suspicions and played the tape that he and Jessica had supposedly recorded of the old man and the little girl. No matter how slow and loud we played it we couldn't find a single overlap or the hint of Jessica taking a breath while he was talking. Still, it was a brilliant performance, as good as the one he had done for Moran earlier and under equal pressure.

"Well," sighed Andy as he reached for the phone. "We know the name of the murderer." He began to dial. "Maybe the police won't mind that we didn't send in a postcard."

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

by JANET E. KEARIN

IT ISN'T THE HEAT

A couple of Central Park's people
Felt so safe they were actually smug.
Said one, "When the days are this humid
It's really too muggy to mug."

BURNING DESIRE

An arsonist at a museum
Confessed he was not very bright.
Said he, "I don't know much about art,
But I certainly know what I light."

FUNNY MONEY

Did you hear of the dumb counterfeiter
Who is serving a stretch in the pen?
He knew that a five-spot was Lincoln
And was sure Andrew Jackson was ten.

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With each new story Joan Richter grows more imaginative and more insightful . . .

THE HOUSE THAT JILL BUILT

by JOAN RICHTER

The pills came in all shapes and sizes and in all colors. They brought them to her, along with some juice, and would stand by the side of her bed, to be sure she swallowed them. Sometimes they would linger in the doorway, studying her, wondering what she was thinking, trying to imagine what strange and secret thoughts were taking place behind her eyes.

At times they detected a change, a sudden lifting of her spirits, a seeming expression of interest, but it always faded.

"Why can't we reach her?"

Jill heard their hushed whispers and knew they were talking about her, but she kept her eyes closed, pretending to sleep. Still she saw them, tidy in their white uniforms and small crisp caps, watching.

She started to save all the little white paper cups the pills came in. She put them in the drawer of the stand beside her bed and one day she was surprised to see how many there were. She counted them, arranging them in a circle on the tray she had pulled in front of her. She turned each of them upside down and slowly, in the stream of some strange and distant memory, they were transformed into tiny white houses, perfect for tiny people.

She fell asleep thinking about a village where only small people lived, where each minutely proportioned house had a miniature garden, shaded by tiny trees where all kinds of bright birds nested and sang and squirrels scampered. There were tiny flowers in the gardens and butterflies and bees so small they would have gone unnoticed if it weren't for their constant humming. Everything was so small and compact, so tidy, nothing could go wrong.

When Jill woke, she remembered the dream. It was the first thing she had remembered in a long time. She concentrated on it and

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began to work out the details, carefully, as if it were an elaborate embroidery.

The front door of each house would have a tiny hand-wrought knocker, polished and shining. There would be curtains at the windows and a child's swing in the yard, and a sandbox, no larger than a matchbox, with pails and shovels and miniature sand molds.

One day when she woke, she remembered something else. Thumbelina. She hadn't thought of her in a long, long time, that tiny heroine of a storybook her mother had read to her, when she was too young to read herself. Thumbelina was a lovely little creature who wore dresses spun from spider webs and carried a long-stemmed violet for a parasol.

Each night her mother read her a little part of the story, a love story in which everything was as it should be, until the end. In the end Thumbelina died.

Jill remembered how she had cried and cried, and couldn't stop, no matter how close her mother held her.

"It's only a story," her mother said. "We can change the ending."

Yes, that's what she was going to do. She was going to change the ending. Her Thumbelina wasn't going to die! The idea excited her so much that she sat straight up in bed. One of the nurses came running, but when Jill saw her, she closed her eyes and ever so slowly sank back against the pillow and pretended to be asleep.

Soon she was and she returned to her dream and began adding to her village. She built a school and a courthouse and a church where she and John would be married. For the church she used four paper cups, three for its base and one for its bell tower. When that was done she planned the streets that led through the village and the paths that wound between the houses and the gardens down by the stream.

A nurse came in with a glass of juice and another pill in a pleated white cup. "What do we have here," she exclaimed, looking at Jill's village. "What a pretty design."

Jill put the pill in her mouth and drank the juice and turned away, waiting for the nurse to leave. When another nurse came into the room and asked the same question, she pretended not to hear. She didn't want anyone to know about her village. It was her secret place where she would live with her John, who was a Jack-of-all-trades.

The next day she decided the village should have a lake and she made one from the blue wrapper of a gauze pad. She made a boat,

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rigged from a Q-tip and Band Aid. Now all she had to decide was just where the village would be.

She thought about the seashore, but remembered that the wind was always strong by the sea and not enough green things grew. Her next thought was of the mountains. There she would be close to the sky, in touch with the sun, with the view of all the land below. But the paths were rocky and steep, and she was afraid of falling, so she had to find another place.

It was from the mountains that she discovered the valley, a green meadow, encircled by hills, shielded from the wind. A silver stream welled up from a hidden spring and flowed into a lake. Moss and fern grew along the banks and in the open places wild flowers bloomed everywhere.

That was why she decided that each house would be named after a wildflower. Hers would be called Lupin, because it was at the edge of the blue lupin forest. Down the lane was Queen Anne's Lace where the Widow Anne lived. Next door was Mustard Seed, a big split-level filled with children. Then came Thistledown and Trillium and around the bend was Black-eyed Sue. The house John lived in was across the lake and she called it Wild Clover.

Each house had a chimney and a hearth, and in front of the hearth lay a love mat. All the mats were woven from ripened milkweed.

It was the order of things to lay a fire each morning and light it each day at dusk. It took the chill from the air and added a warmth that reached into the far corners of each house with a golden glow.

The days in the valley were filled with sparkling sunshine, the songs of birds, and the sound of the stream running its course. There were herbs and wild strawberries and honey to be gathered, and wood to be collected. Every day the mat was fluffed and aired.

Jill always lit the fire just as the sun began to slip past the first hill, so that it would be glowing when John came up the path. In its flickering warmth they would lie entwined, loving the whole night through, until morning brought the sun and fresh dew and the ritual of a new day, without trial or turmoil.

One day she had the fire lit and glowing and had gone to sit by the window to wait. She couldn't remember when it was that John had begun to take the long way around the lake, but now each day he came to her at a different hour. No more, as when they first began, could she count on his being with her before the first star shone.

The next day she was in the same place, waiting. She watched

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the sun begin its slow descent behind the distant hills. Its orange flare settled into a pink cloud glow, purple shadows deepened, the evening star ascended, and darkness fell. Still John had not come up the path.

She rose and poked at the fire, added a new log, and returned to the window to wait again. What if one day he were not to come at all? Her heart almost stopped at the thought, but then leaped with quick relief at the sound of his footstep on the path. She flew to the door and twined her arms around his neck. "What kept you so long?"

"Thistledown needed some help with her shutters and the Widow Anne wanted me to look at her well."

"But, John," she pleaded softly, "you've kept me waiting so long." He stroked her hair and lifted her chin so that their lips were only a whisper apart.

"I'm here now. What does it matter where I've been or where I'm going? Waiting is part of loving a John who is a Jack-of-all-trades. Remember I am no ordinary man."

She heard his words, but the meaning was lost to her; she understood only the throbbing of her heart as she sank down beside him by the fire. It did not matter how late he was, so long as he had come.

But before that night was through, he rose.

"What is it?" she cried. "Where are you going?"

"Black-eyed Sue wants me to have a look at her chimney."

"Now?" She rose quickly. "I'll go with you and when you're done we can go for a sail on the lake."

He shook his head and moved toward the door. "It will take a while and, besides, I have another stop to make."

She stood shivering in the waning fire's light, uncertain and afraid. She watched him disappear along the path and then knelt down to stroke the mat, to relive the traces of their love.

The fire sparked and stung her eyes. "Oh, John," she sobbed and rose and ran, without thinking, out the door.

A quarter moon threw a silver sheen across the path. Night birds wheeled across the sky and in the grass the crickets chirped. She stopped and looked up at the stars, points of sparkling light shining from a far-off world. As she stood, with her head thrown back, eyes focused on one small star, wishing, a curl of smoke rose beyond a clump of trees. She knew the house from which it came. It was Black-eyed Sue's! John has the chimney working already, she thought with pride. He surely is no ordinary man.

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She hurried along the path, and when she reached the door, she raised her hand to lift the knocker, but stopped when she heard a voice crying from inside.

"But John, why must you go so soon?"

"Thistledown needs some help with her shutters and the Widow Anne wants me to have a look at her well."

"But John, you've kept me waiting so long."

"Waiting is part of loving a John who is a Jack-of-all-trades. Remember I am no ordinary man."

The next morning, after Jill tidied her paper house and swept the hearth, and fluffed the mat, she went to walk in the meadow. Her eyes were dry but her hands were clasped tight against the slow and lonely pounding of her heart. Indeed, her John was a busy man.

The sounds of the meadow settled around her. A gentle breeze blew the grasses and fluttered in the trees. The bees hummed and in their selfless, droning song she heard their message of die . . . die . . . She thrust away the thought. She would not die. She had promised she would change the ending.

A butterfly, with a flutter of its opalescent wings, hovered over a flower and then flew off. She saw it dip from bush to bush and knew that, in all its beauty, its life had only one season.

She would not settle for a season. She wanted a lifetime!

Then as she stood, small and silent in the summer sun, a familiar cry traversed the valley of her mind. It began in the distant hills and flew back across the sky. It was the scream of crows. So many times she had listened to their eerie cries and watched the flapping of their wings, but never had she understood their call. K I L L . . .

Her wild and piercing screams brought them running, Black-eyed Sue and Queen Anne, tidy in their uniforms and crisp white caps. She woke and saw them standing by her bed, but hurriedly she turned her face away. She had tried to keep them from knowing about her secret place, her village, where life was ordered and simple and without deceit. But they had tricked her. They had found it and moved in and taken away her John.

She closed her eyes against their stares and shut her ears. She retreated to her private place and did not hear them when they spoke.

"If only we could reach her. If only we could let her know he's dead. Or is it that she really knows? And to kill him once was not enough."

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a *NEW* short story by

JEAN L. BACKUS

He was bearded and jeaned, drifting around the country in a hearse, and working on occasion but scrounging when he had to. His wife was dead, there were no kids, and he "was a wanderer by nature not necessity." Then he met the widow Alma . . .

A HEARSE IS NOT A HOME

by JEAN L. BACKUS

Recently I came face to face with myself, beard and all. The encounter brought on by a scary crisis in interdependency and masculine responsibility and other nonsense like that, including marital fidelity.

I'd been drifting around the country since my wife was killed, living on a small inheritance, working when I could, scrounging when I had to. Amazing the people you meet on the road these days, willing chicks and a few real innocents whom I didn't touch, those on drugs and those on the health-food kick, those damned and those into a new religion.

So one day I found myself in Berkeley, California, with no place to stay and a rule on the city books that nobody could sleep in a vehicle parked on the street. Well, I drove around until I saw a *GARAGE FOR RENT* sign in a cul-de-sac off one of the main boulevards. I parked my old hearse in front, got out, opened the back doors, and went in to slick up, comb my beard, and so on. My jeans were dirty but decent, so I closed the hearse and went to ring the doorbell.

The lady who answered wasn't unattractive exactly, just unkempt. And wary. I asked in my best manner what she wanted to rent the garage and she said a hundred bucks a month. Imagine. I asked

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how long she'd been asking such a huge sum, and she said a long time, but it kept the undesirables away.

I toyed with the idea of settling for a week just to have a base for mail and going to a launderette, and while I was thinking, I took a look at the scabby paint on the porch and the dirty windows and weedy garden. As rundown and unkempt as the lady of the house. Finally I offered to clean up the place if she'd let me use the garage for as long as the work lasted.

She was sharper than I thought she'd be, because she put a time limit on the deal. Two weeks, she said, and either leave or pay thereafter. Well, that was fair and I agreed.

Then she asked my name. Sam, I told her, and what was hers? She was the widow Alma. And finally she asked me in for coffee.

The old house was as rundown inside as out, and I pondered the picture. Here was this woman about my own age, around forty, who hadn't the need or the strength or the inclination to work. She wasn't bad-looking, only slovenly, as if she had no one to dress up for, which of course, being a widow, she hadn't. I wondered what she did in her spare time, and looking around saw some sewing and a television and half-filled coffee cups.

Her hair was dirty blonde, long and straight, and it fell over her pale blue eyes so she was always pushing at it; her hands were soft and white. Under a grubby dress her bust and hips weren't too bad, but her middle sagged a bit, and her shoes were only old sneakers with holes as if she scuffed her toes a lot.

Her eyes met mine directly, no side glances or hidden meanings—her whole manner was like that, direct, on the level. A nice lady even if she was lazy. Or maybe she was sick or something. Or still in mourning for her husband. I didn't ask, it being no business of mine, and anyway, I was wary of involvement. That I didn't need, ever again. With anyone.

In the beginning I played straight with her. I put the hearse in the garage and invited her in to see how well I managed. She looked around and suddenly the old mattress and dirty blankets on the floor, the Coleman camp stove and lantern, and my old record player, even the heaps of books lying about, didn't look so hot to me either.

"But where do you wash?" Alma asked at last.

"Public johns, ma'am. Is there a gas station reasonably close?"

She was silent a moment, and then she said, "There's a lavatory you can use at the back of the garage. It has a shower."

We went to inspect the place. "This is neat," I said. "Thank you."

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"My husband always changed here after he worked in the garden," she told me. "He looked a bit like you. Without a beard."

I got the funny feeling she was measuring me against her late husband, thinking perhaps that clean-shaven I might pass. In the dark. I thanked her again and hustled her outside.

"Vandals," Alma said, "you want to watch out for vandals. The neighborhood isn't what it was when we came here fifteen years ago. People were friendly then, and they cut their lawns and kept their houses painted. It was nice."

"Yeah, it must have been. Well, thanks again, Alma. I'll go to work in the morning. See you tomorrow."

When the two weeks were up, the job was nowhere near done, and Alma agreed to another two weeks. She was a reasonable lady—she'd seen me stripped to the waist and sweating. The front lawn was mowed, the borders were weeded, the shrubs and trees in back were pruned, and the roses lush with bloom. The first day I worked in the garden, half a dozen people stopped and asked if Alma was getting ready to sell, and a couple of real estaters drifted by as well. I gathered the property was a bonanza if Alma wanted out.

I took a silly sense of pride in the garden, and it being a warm summer, I'd set the Beethoven going loud on my record player and lie out on the grass in the evening. Several times Alma opened a window and sat just inside, but I never invited her to join me.

Then one afternoon when I was puttering with systemic for the roses, I saw her come home pushing one of those heavy grocery carts up and over the step to the front walk.

"For Lord's sake, Alma, how far's the market?"

"Six blocks over and two up."

"You do it this way all the time?"

"How else? You know I haven't a car, and it's too much to bring on the bus. Besides, it gets me out, gives me a little exercise."

"I know but it's heavy. Be my guest next time."

"In the hearse?" She grimaced. "No, thank you."

"All right then. I'll walk along and push the darn thing back."

"That's kind of you," she said, "but no, thank you. I can manage."

I sat down on the lawn, pondering the scratchy independence of women, and how the modern female has messed up the scene for those with gentlemanly hangovers. Still, it had given me a little more insight into Alma. As hard as I was trying to avoid involvement, she was now trying to push me away. I knew almost nothing about her, only things she'd let drop by accident, like the day her

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monthly check was late in the mail, and how her husband had been killed in an accident four years ago, and that she had no family or old friends.

I had told her only what I didn't care if she knew about me—that I'd been born in Maine, my wife was dead, there were no kids, and I was a wanderer by nature, not necessity.

Three mornings later Alma knocked on the hearse before I was up, and when I spread the back doors wide she looked at me and then quickly away.

"I'm going to market early to beat the heat. Want to come along?"

"Sure. Just give me time to put on pants. I don't own any pajamas."

"Look in the closet beside the lavatory," she said, almost turning her back on me. "There's an old trunk of my husband's in there."

Was there ever. Suits, slacks, shirts, underwear, even handkerchiefs, with monograms yet. And pajamas. Half a dozen pairs. I found everything washed and ironed and neatly folded too. I used a few safety pins, and the slacks didn't look too bad on me, although I was a lot thinner than her husband had been.

Her eyes widened, but she didn't say anything when we met outside half an hour later. Today her hair was tied back with a pink ribbon; she had on a pretty pink dress, and a little makeup. Finally she said, "If you shaved, you'd resemble my husband a bit more."

"No, thanks, Alma. I'm Sam, and I don't dig the idea of resembling—or replacing—your husband."

"I didn't mean that," she said, and her heels clacked harshly on the sidewalk as she hurried ahead of me.

We did a big shopping, heavy things like flour and sugar and shortening, and I wondered what she was storing up for. When we got back to the house, I helped her put the stuff away, and then she asked me to dinner and suddenly things got a bit too domestic, however unintentionally, and I went out and stayed out until it was time to eat that evening.

After I finished the garden, I began on the house—the sagging floors, the cracked plaster, the leaky drains, the holes in the kitchen linoleum. A wonder Alma hadn't hooked a heel and hurt herself. I patched it all up and laid plastic tiles in the kitchen, and replaced the old electric wiring in the attic, and she never questioned any charge I asked for supplies. Fortunately, honesty had never been a problem with me, but just the same it was nice to be trusted.

And she was feeding me now. A meal a day at night because she couldn't stand to see me so thin, and it was nice to have someone

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to cook for and company at the table. I didn't tell her I was afraid of getting fat, and didn't like the personal relationship getting closer between us, because when I tasted her cooking I couldn't turn it down. No way. Not for anything.

The work ran on until I'd been there two months, perfectly happy one day, and waking up the next morning knowing I had to get out of the city, away from the traffic and the smog, and the neighbors who greeted me by name but never came to visit, and Alma who cooked like an angel and thought I'd resemble her husband if I shaved my beard.

So I took off, intending to go for good. Just backed the hearse out of the garage without saying anything at all. Three days I was gone. Then I couldn't stand it any longer. When I drove up in front of Alma's house on the third night, I caught her looking out the window just as I set the brake.

I bounced up the steps as if I already owned the place, and before I could ring the bell she opened the door. Her dress was dirty and pinned together at the neck, and her hair hung limp over her forehead.

I swallowed. "Look, lady, I'd like to clean out your attic in trade for parking in your garage for a few days."

She laughed, one of the few times I'd heard her laugh, although it sounded more like a sob. "Sam, you fool! Where have you *been?* Oh, I look so messy. I thought you'd left forever."

"Without saying goodbye?" I couldn't meet her eyes. "Why, I wouldn't do that, Alma girl."

"Well, you didn't say where you were going or if you'd be back, so what else could I think? Tell me where you've been, what you've been doing."

"Collecting," I said, ready with a lie. "I'm going to open a shop. And sell things. You wouldn't have a cup of coffee handy, would you?"

"Oh, Sam, forgive me. Of course. Are you hungry? Come in. I haven't eaten all day. I'll fix us something."

That meal was different from before. I don't know. The dark night outside the windows, the china and silver on the tablecloth, the canned pork and beans because she hadn't been expecting me, and most of all the feeling of welcome, as if I'd been missed. Terribly.

"Now, tell me about this shop," she said, over coffee. "What kind? What will you use for capital, for money?"

"Nothing. I'll see an old house, and I'll say, 'Ma'am, let me clean

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your attic or basement, and it won't cost you a cent. I won't throw away anything you want to keep, and I'll haul anything you don't want away when I leave.' That's how I'll get my stock."

"Oh," Alma said, brightening. "Antiques."

"Not really. Souvenir spoons and comic books and toy trains and stuff like that. Collectibles, they're called. Below antiques, but above junk."

"Sounds like junk to me," she said. "But you know what you're doing. You always do."

"Well. I try. Only I can't stay here. I'm broke until the first of the month, and you don't need a thing done to the house or garden now. I only came by to say hello."

"Oh, forget it, Sam. I'll stake you until you get settled. You can store what you collect in the garage. Maybe I can help, if you'll let me. Let's go see what you brought back this time."

"Not on your life," I exclaimed in panic. "You think it's junk, so you can just wait until I clean it up so it looks like something people will buy."

"All right. I promise I won't even go near the garage. But you have to make me a promise too."

"What?" I eyed her, worried about how deep I was getting in.

"Let me know before you go off again to collect."

"Okay. I'll do that. I promise."

"You know, under that shrubbery on your chin, you're a very nice man."

"And you're pretty nice yourself, lady." And then I thought, well, why not? "Time to hit the sack, I guess." I groaned aloud and shook my head. "I can't remember when I last slept in an honest-to-God bed."

"Good night," Alma said. She all but pushed me out the front door.

I went away for the second time a week later, and when I told Alma, she looked so wistful I almost asked her along, except that would have blown the whole thing.

When I returned four days later, she was neatly dressed, her hair was soft and clean, and she had a roasted turkey in the refrigerator. She let me pick a wing while she sliced breast and heated stuffing and gravy.

"I didn't know exactly when to expect you," she said, "so I filled the freezer. And I baked bread and cookies. Next time I'll pack some food for you to take along."

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"I gather you missed me," I said, watching her with growing pleasure.

She stopped slicing turkey for a second. "Yes. Well. I think that's enough meat for now. Want cranberry sauce with it?"

"Of course. Turkey's not turkey without it."

She got the jelly and sat down opposite me. "Tell me what you found this time. I've been trying to guess. Old china? Furniture? Oh, and I thought of patchwork quilts. And old shawls are good, either knitted or crocheted. I've seen them in the second-hand shops around Berkeley. I've been browsing for ideas for you."

"Everything you mentioned except quilts," I said grandly. "And old paintings and some silver. Hey, this turkey's marvelous."

"Good. There are quilts upstairs," Alma told me. "My grandmother made some and I made the rest. After I left Utah."

"So that's where you're from. How come a good Mormon girl ends up in Berkeley with no family or friends?"

She gripped her knife as if it were a dagger, and her eyes went stony-hard. "I'm no Mormon now. I was the oldest of fifteen kids, and I brought them all up because my mother was always having another. When the sixteenth was announced, I walked out. It was that, or kill myself." The knife came point down on her plate, and split it.

After a moment Alma got up and took the pieces of plate to the sink and stood there with her back to me. All I could think of was what a rough deal she'd had all the way along.

When Alma finally turned around, her eyes were normal again. "Forget what I said, Sam. Let's go up and look at the quilts."

There were twenty-four of them in the attic, in a variety of old patterns, all made with tiny stitches, warm and yet lightweight, the kind my mother used to make in Maine when I was a kid.

"Look," I said. "These are valuable. In the east you could get at least a couple of hundred dollars apiece for them, maybe more. You should find a store that'll take them on consignment if you don't want to keep them. Then you could take a trip. Or buy a car."

"But, Sam—?" She stared at me. "Won't you take them for your shop?"

I sat back on my heels and looked at myself, face to face, beard and all. After a second I said, "Alma girl, there isn't going to be a shop. I didn't collect anything. I'm moving on for good tomorrow."

"What!" She looked almost as she had when she broke her dinner plate. "But you said—"

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"I lied. I wanted a base. A hearse is not a home, after all, and I liked your cooking, but I don't want to get involved."

"We'd better go downstairs now." Her voice was dead. Then she picked up a couple of the quilts. "Put these in the hearse, Sam. For when it gets cold. Wherever you are."

For a good long minute we stared at each other. "Thanks. Do I have to leave tonight?"

"Tomorrow. By noon." She turned and went downstairs and I followed and let myself out.

I thought it over during the night, knowing I could start a shop if I wanted to bad enough, only the idea bored me. I could find work, any amount of it, if I wanted. What I couldn't do was get all dressed up and play house with Alma. Or any other woman. On the other hand . . .

Alma knocked on the hearse before I was up, and wearing her husband's pajamas, I stumbled to open the back doors.

"I'm fixing breakfast for you," she said, "and you'd better take the food in the freezer. It's no good to me, and it'll keep for a few days."

"Thanks. Okay. You're being mighty nice about this."

But she was gone.

I took my time washing and dressing, and when I entered the kitchen, Alma caught her breath, but she didn't say anything, just put out juice and toast, set eggs and bacon before me, and filled my coffee cup. Then she sat down to watch me eat.

"Aren't you hungry?" I asked, attacking my plate.

"Not very."

I said nothing more, but I let her refill my cup again and again even after I finished eating. Finally I thought of something to say.

"How was your husband killed?"

She went white and her lips tightened. "He was in an accident . . . an accident. With a girl f-friend. A car accident. They were both k-killed. They were running away together."

That told me a lot more than I'd already guessed. "Where does your monthly check come from?"

"It's my widow's pension. My husband was a mining assayer for the state. He made good money, and we were still married when he died." She looked at me. "What is this, Sam? You've never pried before."

"Doesn't mean I haven't wanted to. You got any savings?"

"I won't tell you."

I got up from the table. "Okay. So long. Nice knowing you."

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"Enough to carry me over emergencies." Her voice was small and sobby. "Does money make all the difference to you?"

"Not really." I sat down. "Tell you what. You sell this house and come away with me. Let's get away from loneliness and memories and all the other pollutants we live with, you and I. Will you do it?"

"Why, how could I?" She looked about to cry. "I've got to think. Don't you . . . that is . . . don't you want to live here?"

"Not permanently. Some wanderers are airplane pilots and some are sailors. Me, I'm just a wanderer, period. I can't live in one place."

"But the house, Sam. I don't want to sell the house."

"Then rent it. What good is it with no man, no kids, no friends?" I took a breath. "If you don't come with me, you won't see me again. Ever. And that's no lie. So take five and make up your mind."

"How do I know you won't use my money and strand me somewhere?"

"You don't." Obviously she sensed something of my panic and revulsion at what I'd just proposed, or she wouldn't hesitate, one way or the other. But what she might think wasn't as bad as it really was. I'd already murdered one wife with my bare hands. In a cold rage at her infidelity. And nothing I learned about her either before or after I was paroled from state prison had ever made me sorry about it. Until now.

"I'll do it, Sam! I'll do it! Is that why you shaved off your beard?"

"Maybe I just didn't like the image of myself."

"Oh, Sam." She leaned against me, and I put my arms around her. "I'm so happy. Only you said yourself a hearse is not a home, so don't ask me to ride in yours. That's all I'll ever ask of you."

"No, I won't do that. We'll take your money and buy a decent camper." As we kissed, I realized how glad and happy I was about what had happened. Of course I could never know for sure how I would handle it if the provocation to kill ever set me off again. But I had a hunch that question was dead and buried now. Along with the sick pleasure I'd taken in driving the beat-up old hearse all over the country.

"You didn't ask," I said, sitting down with Alma on my lap, "but I'll promise just the same. You keep on cooking the way you do, and so help me, I'll never strand you anywhere. Ever."

"Q"

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a *NEW* detective story by

MICHAEL UNDERWOOD

first publication in the United States

In real life, death can occur in almost *every conceivable place. In fiction the range of locale is even wider—death can occur in* every *conceivable place. One of the rarer scenes-of-death, however, is the auditorium of an opera house. And that is where we now transport you—to a performance of* Die Walküre. *Meet the narrator, Mr. Charles Mason, an opera buff whose passion for Wagner has taken him to the four corners of the opera world . . .*

DEATH AT THE OPERA

by MICHAEL UNDERWOOD

Whenever I have occasion to dip into *Who'sWho*, I usually look first to see what the contributor has listed under "Recreations." This can often tell one more about the person than all the lines taken up with his accomplishments. It invariably paid me dividends when I was still an estate agent and dealing with important clients. It always helped if I was able to talk to the person concerned about gardening or theater or sailing or whatever the subject might be. The fact that my own knowledge of it might be minimal mattered far less than that I showed an interest.

Of course, sometimes the failure to mention a particular hobby could prove even more revealing. I recall selling a property for a High Court judge on one occasion. He was a stiff, unbending man without any noticeable sense of humor. "Walking" and "Reading" were listed as his unexceptionable recreations. It was only when I visited his house I learned quite by chance that he would pass his

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winter evenings doing embroidery. His obvious desire to keep this fact secret lowered him still further in my estimation.

But all this is really by the way. What I had been going to say was that, had I ever been invited to contribute an entry to that prestigious volume, I would have headed my list of recreations with "Opera, especially Wagner."

I have a passion for Wagner that has taken me to performances in places as far apart as Moscow and San Francisco, Vienna and Buenos Aires. In fact, since I retired five years ago, most of my traveling has been devoted to his cause, with an annual statutory visit to Bayreuth, the shrine for all Wagnerians.

I ought perhaps to say that my passion is unshared by most of my friends who regard it as an aberration in an otherwise reasonably normal person.

But however strong the lure of Wagner, attendance at his operas can bring hazards of their own. For example, you can find yourself sitting next to someone who fidgets or coughs, or be faced in the foyer by a notice regretting the indisposition of one of the leading singers. These things can, of course, happen at performances of other operas, but with less disastrous effect. And even if you manage to escape these particular hazards, others still lurk, for no composer loaded his singers and musicians, not to mention his producers and stagehands, with such superhuman difficulties. Even when the singing and orchestral playing are sublime, disaster can still strike. The dragon in *Siegfried* can get inextricably caught up in a piece of scenery, the hero's sword can break in two just after it has been invincibly forged, and majestic Valhalla can develop an incurable wobble like a jelly on a vibrating surface. The list is almost inexhaustible.

And recently I was involved in a nightmarish drama that not even a practised Wagnerian has ever envisaged. Death on the stage is one thing, but sudden death in the auditorium is something different altogether, particularly when, to use the police colloquialism, foul play is suspected.

When a few years ago the well-known philanthropist, Sir Julius Meiler, announced that he was proposing to build an opera house in the park of his Oxfordshire home and devote it primarily to an annual festival of Wagner operas, there was great enthusiasm among us devotees. Sir Julius went quietly ahead with his plans. Since he could no longer travel to Wagner, he would realize an

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ambition and bring the composer's work to his own doorstep. He employed top men at heaven knows what expense and from his drawing-room window he was able to sit and watch the edifice slowly rise up a quarter of a mile across the parkland.

Even if he never entertained any doubts about the ultimate success of the project, there were many, like myself, who saw it all ending with the old boy's death or in hideous bankruptcy. But neither of these events occurred and six months before the first performances were due to be given, the box office opened.

Needless to say, Sir Julius had himself decided which operas were to be performed and long before the final bricks were laid, conductors, singers, and producers had been engaged for the first season. There were to be two cycles of *The Ring* and three performances each of *Parsifal* and *Tristan and Isolde*.

Though, as I say, I had been skeptical about the outcome of the project, I had made up my mind that, if it did come off, I would be there, come hell or high water. Fortunately I had a contact in the box-office manager who was a friend of a friend.

I can still remember my excitement the day my tickets arrived. They were for the second cycle of *The Ring* and for performances of the other two operas. Not even the horror of subsequent events has dimmed my recollection of that sunny June morning when our cheerful postman delivered the self-addressed envelope that had accompanied my application.

There were still three months to go before that fateful performance of *Die Walküre* on Tuesday, the 22nd of September.

For the non-Wagnerian, I ought to explain that *The Ring* (full title: *Der Ring des Nibelungen*) consists of four operas amounting to about twenty hours of music, if you include the intervals. Wagner believed in giving his fans their money's worth and some of his "acts" are as long as whole operas by other composers. So far as *The Ring* is concerned, *Das Rheingold*, which is the first, is the shortest. It lasts just under two and a half hours and is performed without an interval. From this you will gather that stamina is almost as important as love of the music. If you're given to fidgets, you'd better stay at home and listen to recordings.

I had been over to Bargewick Park, Sir Julius Meiler's place, a couple of times before the festival opened. Once to a large and noisy party to which I was invited by my friend, the box-office manager, and once for a privately conducted tour of the opera house itself

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which I had found much more interesting. It wasn't an elegant building to look at, but the acoustics were said to rival those at Bayreuth. Sir Julius had insisted that everything should be subordinated to the acoustics, hence the somewhat functional interior. The seats might be on the hard side, but they were guaranteed not to absorb any of the sound.

I greeted Monday, the 21st of September with a sense of great exhilaration. It was almost beyond the dream of any Wagnerian that the operas were about to be performed with internationally famous singers in a brand-new theater almost on his own doorstep. Bargewick Park was, in fact, twelve miles from where I lived. The Gods could not have been more beneficent.

Das Rheingold was scheduled to start at half-past seven and I arrived a good hour before that. The car park was already quite full and I made my way to the long bar which ran the length of one side of the building and bought myself a glass of champagne. What else on such an occasion! Almost everyone was in evening dress and the air of expectation was enormous. Wagnerians had flocked from all points of the compass to attend the opening performance.

After a second glass of champagne to put the seal on my mood, I decided to go and claim my seat. I had studied the plan in advance and knew exactly where it was—one from the end of the twelfth row of the stalls.

An elderly man and his arrogant-looking younger companion were already occupying the two seats to the right of mine. They tucked their legs in with a poorly concealed lack of grace to let me pass, for which I murmured my thanks. Seeing that there were still fifteen minutes to go before the curtain rose, their attitude seemed rather churlish. Wagner may bring us together, but, as I've discovered before, he doesn't necessarily make us love each other.

The seat on my left, which was against the wall, was still empty and I wondered who was to be my neighbor on that side.

A sudden outburst of applause greeted the arrival of Sir Julius Meiler who was wheeled in his chair into a specially prepared space in the center of the circle.

The house lights were dimming when I became aware of upheaval at the end of our row as a middle-aged woman pushed her way along to the empty seat on my left.

She was obviously hot and bothered and almost fell headlong over the feet of the two men next to me. I stood up to let her pass more easily and then held her seat down for her. She murmured profuse

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thanks and sank back with an audible sigh of relief as those incredible opening chords rose from the orchestra pit, signifying our immediate transportation to the bottom of the Rhine.

It was not long, however, before I became aware of suppressed coughing on my left and I shot her a quick glance to indicate my awareness. Then at the very moment when Alberich the dwarf seized the Rhinemaiden's gold, she began rummaging in her handbag. Recognizing the symptoms all too well, I realized that in her rush to arrive on time she had left her cough lozenges at home.

She held a tissue to her mouth and tried to clear her throat in silence, which, as everyone knows, is quite impossible. Hastily I reached into my pocket for the throat pastilles I always carry on visits to the opera. I seldom require them myself and am motivated entirely by self-protection. I passed her the whole tin and she communicated her gratitude by patting my hand.

They obviously did the trick for there were no further disturbances and the performance reached its majestic end with the Gods making their entry into a satisfyingly solid-looking Valhalla.

"Wonderful, wonderful," she murmured to me several times in the course of the curtain calls which continued for fifteen minutes.

Eventually the house lights came up and we both sat back in our seats temporarily exhausted while the two men on my other side thrust their way out as if they had a last train to catch.

"You enjoyed the performance?" I said to her after the curtain had come down for the last time.

"Enormously. Surely you did, too?"

"Very much. Though wasn't it Ernest Newman who said one'll have to wait till one reaches heaven for the perfect performance of Wagner?"

"If the rest of the cycle is as good as that, it'll be an unnecessary wait as far as I'm concerned," she said.

I laughed. "I'll reserve judgment until we've heard more."

She reached down for her program which had fallen to the floor and gave a hitch to her shawl which had slipped from one shoulder. "I do hope I didn't disturb you with my chokes. You saved my life with your cough sweets. I was sure I had some in my bag, but I must have forgotten them in the rush of leaving home. I kept on being held up and thought I was never going to get here. I think I'd have lain down and died if they hadn't let me in."

"You certainly ran it rather close," I remarked. "Don't forget that tomorrow's performance starts at six."

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"My husband'll be at home to see I set off in good time. He was out at a meeting this evening or I'd never have been late. He's one of those punctual people who has never missed a train in his life. I shan't dare tell him I forgot to bring my cough lozenges." With a laugh she added, "He regards them as a minimum requirement for sitting through Wagner. But then he's hopelessly unmusical. We have a pact. He lets me come to the opera and I let him go off catching butterflies."

"He's an entomologist?"

"He's written a book on the subject," she said with a touch of pride.

As we walked together toward the car park, she told me a bit more about herself. She lived in North Oxford and her husband, who had been a supply officer in the navy, now worked in the bursar's office of one of the colleges.

I estimated her age as being around sixty. She had a pleasant round face and, I suspected, a perennial weight problem.

We reached the car park and were about to part company when she let out an exclamation.

"I've never given you back your cough sweets." She fumbled with her handbag and promptly dropped it.

"Keep them," I said, retrieving her bag. "You may need them tomorrow. And, anyway, I've got more at home."

With that I bade her good night and went in search of my car.

The next evening I arrived at Bargewick Park soon after five o'clock and once more fortified myself with two glasses of excellent champagne before going to my seat.

I was both surprised and gratified to find Mrs. Sharpe already in her place—she had told me her name was Helen Sharpe before we parted company the previous evening.

"See!" she said with a note of triumph. "I'm not the scatty female you obviously thought I was."

"No problems getting here this evening then?" I said with a smile.

"My husband pushed me out of the house far sooner than was necessary and I've even brought my own cough sweets this time." She gave me a rueful look. "But I've just discovered that I've left yours at home. I'm terribly sorry. They were in my other handbag."

"Don't worry. I've brought a further supply."

"What a couple of philanthropists you and Sir Julius are! One provides the music, the other the cough sweets," she said with a merry laugh.

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Shortly afterward the two men on my right took their seats without so much as a nod or glance in my direction and a few minutes later the cellos were whipping up the storm music that forms the prelude of the opera.

Act I of *Die Walküre* is one of my favorite parts of the whole *Ring*. It lasts over an hour, but, for me, there is never one flagging second. And when the roles of Siegmund and Sieglinde are sung as gloriously as they were that evening, I quickly became immersed in the music and oblivious of everything else around me. Mrs. Sharpe could have been coughing her head off and I don't believe I'd have noticed.

I turned to her as soon as the curtain came down and was surprised to see her leaning against the wall on her other side in apparent sleep.

It was only when the lights came up and people began to leave the auditorium that I turned back to her.

With horror I realized it wasn't sleep that had overcome her, but death.

I must say that the authorities at Bargewick Park were as efficient at removing bodies from the auditorium as they were at putting on an opera. In no time at all Mrs. Sharpe's remains were carried out with the minimum of fuss.

I went off to the bar and had a large brandy to help me recover from the shock of my discovery. When we returned for Act 2, I realized I was more distracted by the empty seat on my left than I had been by the poor woman's coughing the previous evening. My discomfort was compounded by the man on my right who seemed deliberately to turn his shoulder on me. For the first time I glanced round at the occupants of the two seats immediately behind. They were a middle-aged couple and the woman gave me a nervous smile before quickly looking elsewhere.

I have seldom enjoyed anything less than I did those two remaining acts. When the performance was finally over, I decided I ought to go back and make myself known to someone in authority. It had only occurred to me toward the end that they might still be trying to identify Mrs. Sharpe. I could at least help with that.

Accordingly, I hung back until the theater was almost empty. Even so, I received a number of curious stares and it suddenly dawned on me that people had taken her to be my wife or, at least, my companion for the evening and were now regarding me as some sort of callous monster.

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I had just reached the foyer when a man stepped forward.

"Excuse me, sir, but may I have a word with you for a moment?"

"Of course. Is it about Mrs. Sharpe?"

He didn't reply, but led the way to a door marked "Private." It was a small office and there was a man inside whom I recognized as the house manager. His photograph appeared in the souvenir program.

"I believe you're Mr. Mason, sir?" the first man said.

"Yes. Charles Mason." For a second I couldn't think how he knew my name, but then I realized he had obviously found out by checking my seat number against my application form.

"I'm Detective Chief Inspector Jackley," he said. "I gather you knew Mrs. Sharpe?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

He frowned. "But you mentioned her name when I first spoke to you, sir."

"We'd exchanged names when we left together after last night's performance."

"You'd not met her previously?"

"I'd never seen her before in my life."

"I see," he said, in a tone which clearly implied that he was reserving judgment on every word I uttered.

"If you look at my written application for tickets," I said slyly, "you'll see that I'm on my own. I imagine Mrs. Sharpe's will show the same. She told me that her husband wasn't at all musical and never accompanied her on these occasions."

"I see," Jackley said again in the same faintly disconcerting tone. "Well, I think that's all for the moment, Mr. Mason. Can we reach you, if necessary, at the address given on your ticket application form?"

"Yes, that's my home."

"Good, then I needn't detain you further."

I got to the door and paused. "Did she have a sudden heart attack or something?" I asked.

"We shan't know the cause of death until after the autopsy," Jackley said, giving me a funny look.

It was only when I was driving home that it occurred to me to wonder what on earth a Detective Chief Inspector would be doing investigating a case of heart attack.

I spent the next day pottering about the garden trying to take my

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mind off what had happened, entirely without success. Normally I would have been eagerly looking forward to *Siegfried* the following night and to the final opera of the cycle, when the whole monumental undertaking reaches its musical and dramatic climax. It was no use telling myself that there couldn't be a better way of dying, because I kept on remembering Detective Chief Inspector Jackley's intrusion on the scene.

About half-past five I went indoors and had a wash. I had just settled down to watch the early evening news on television when a car drew up outside and two men got out. One of them I recognized immediately as Jackley. For a few seconds they stared up at the roof as if searching for some structural fault. Then they advanced up the path. I waited until they had rung the bell before going to open the door.

"Good evening, Mr. Mason," Jackley said. "I wonder if my colleague and I might come in and have a word with you? Incidentally, this is Detective Sergeant Denham."

I led the way into the living room.

"Nice home you have," Jackley remarked, glancing about him. "But then it would be surprising if a retired estate agent couldn't pick himself a plum." He gave me a small smile.

My ex-profession had certainly *not* appeared on my application form for opera tickets, so it was obvious that the police had been doing some homework on me. Moreover, they were ready to let me know the fact. I decided to hold my tongue and oblige them to state their business, which Jackley wasn't long in doing.

"I understand you supplied Mrs. Sharpe with some cough lozenges," he said with a mildly quizzical expression.

"Not last night. It was during the performance the previous evening."

"That agrees with what Mr. Fox and Mr. Driver have told us."

"And who might they be?"

"They occupied the two seats on your right. They saw you pass Mrs. Sharpe your tin of cough lozenges."

"Oh, did they!" I exclaimed in a nettled tone.

"You sound put out," Jackley said equably. "I thought you Wagner worshippers were all chums together."

"There was nothing chummy about those two as far as I was concerned."

"But you're not denying you handed Mrs. Sharpe your lozenges?"

"Of course not. Why should I deny it? And, anyway, so what?"

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"Ah, so what, you ask. Well, the answer to that, Mr. Mason, is it appears Mrs. Sharpe didn't die a natural death, but was poisoned. Murdered by a dose of potassium cyanide. Now, that's a poison that acts very rapidly and so the irresistible inference is that she must have ingested it during the actual course of the performance. That's where your cough lozenges become relevant."

"Oh, my God, that's terrible!" I said, feeling as if the Chief Inspector had given my room a sudden violent spin. "But it certainly couldn't have been anything to do with the ones I gave her. She left them at home yesterday and brought her own."

"What makes you say that, Mr. Mason?"

"She told me so. Apologized for not returning mine. Said she'd left them in her other bag, the one she'd been carrying the previous evening."

For a moment Jackley looked nonplused. "She told you that?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"When we met at our seats yesterday evening."

"I can't understand why she should have said that," he remarked in a tone of clear disbelief, "because it wasn't true." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a tin which was enclosed in a cellophane envelope. "Is this the tin you gave her?"

"Yes, that's the sort I buy. Buckland's."

"We found this tin in her handbag when we were called to Bargewick Park last night. There was also a packet of Coff-Stop lozenges in the bag. Can you explain why she should have lied to you, Mr. Mason?"

"I can only repeat what she said to me."

"Doesn't it strike you as very odd?"

"I don't know enough about the lady to answer that," I said warily.

"And you still say that you had never met her before?"

"Never."

"You don't live far apart."

"Nor do I from a hundred and twenty thousand other people in this area, but I assure you I don't know them all."

"That's the best you can say?"

"It's all I can say."

"Do you have a further supply of Buckland's lozenges?"

"Yes."

"Any objection to handing them over?"

"None."

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"If you tell Sergeant Denham where they are, he can fetch them."

"I'll fetch them myself," I replied frostily.

"You don't trust the police?" Jackley said with an air of faint amusement.

"It doesn't seem that they trust me."

"I assure you I'm doing no more than duty requires, Mr. Mason. At this stage of an inquiry it's questions, questions all the way."

"And I've given you truthful answers."

"Every answer has to be tested. You say that yours are truthful, but I have to be sure."

"You can be."

"But can I?" He fixed me with an intent look. "It doesn't exactly tally with what Mrs. Sharpe told her husband when she arrived home the night before last." The room seemed to take another violent spin as Jackley went on. "According to Mr. Sharpe, you had considerably upset his wife. You behaved so strangely that she began to wonder if you mightn't be a mental patient. And she became even more apprehensive when you forced your cough lozenges on her."

"What absolute rubbish! I don't believe for one moment that she ever said anything of the sort. I've never been a mental patient in my life and there was nothing remotely strange about my behavior. You can ask the couple who were sitting behind us."

"The fact still remains, Mr. Mason, that she did have your tin of Buckland's lozenges in her handbag last night. Are you quite sure she told you she'd left them at home?"

"Absolutely."

"Ah, well!" he said with a sigh. "If you'll just let us have your remaining supply, we'll be on our way. I'll doubtless be in touch with you again."

After their departure I poured myself a large Scotch and sat down to try and sort out my thoughts. To say that I was in a state of shock was a pathetic understatement. I felt as if my whole world had become unpivoted.

The immediate decision which faced me was whether or not to attend the performance of *Siegfried* the next evening. If I didn't go, it would be quickly assumed that I was in some way connected with Mrs. Sharpe's death. If I did turn up, I was going to be the cynosure of furtive glances and whispered comment, the effect of which not even the power of Wagner's music was likely to erase.

Moreover, I kept on recalling that part of the plot involves a

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character named Mime trying to induce Siegfried to drink a potion of poison. At least, they didn't have cough lozenges in that mythical era; nevertheless it was hardly conducive to an evening for forgetting one's troubles.

In the event, I did go and found the experience every bit as grim as I had expected. My attendance at *Götterdämmerung* two nights later was not quite as bad, though it was still testing enough. On each occasion I sat staring at the stage with fixed concentration, remaining in my seat during the intervals. Mrs. Sharpe's seat was unoccupied at both performances and Messrs. Fox and Driver regarded me with even greater disdain than previously.

What should have been exhilarating occasions had turned into a ghastly ordeal.

A week passed before I heard anything further. I scanned the local paper each day, but news of the case was soon reduced to a small item on an inside page to the effect that police inquiries were still continuing into the "mystery of the opera-goer's death." Earlier Mr. Sharpe was reported as saying there must be a mad poisoner at large who was prepared to strike indiscriminately as nobody could have had the slightest motive for murdering his wife. I took this to be an arrow shot deliberately in my direction.

I had a great urge to call Detective Chief Inspector Jackley, but refrained from doing so as I feared he might misconstrue my interest in his inquiries. I tried to telephone my friend in the box office at Bargewick Park. Three times, in fact. But once he was at a meeting and the other two times I was told he was out, so that, in my slightly paranoid state, I immediately assumed that he was trying to avoid me.

All in all, it was the most nerve-wracking and miserable week of my life. By the end I had almost become a recluse, finding it even an ordeal to be with friends.

I was just sitting down to a lonely cold lunch one day toward the end of the following week when the telephone rang.

"Mr. Mason? Detective Chief Inspector Jackley here. Are you going to be home this afternoon?"

"As far as I know," I said, trying to sound unconcerned and knowing very well that I would be at home.

"Good, I'll drop by about four o'clock."

His tone had told me nothing and I spent the next three hours in wild speculation about the reason for his visit.

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He arrived alone and accepted the offer of a cup of tea, both of which I took to be hopeful signs.

"I think we've got the case just about sewn up," he said, as I handed him his tea. He gave me a wry smile. "As far as I was concerned there were only two suspects from the very outset. The husband and you. And the husband was always the more likely. The problem was to establish a motive."

"And you've been able to do that?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"Oh, the usual. Another woman. A much younger person."

"Was she involved too?"

He nodded. "She's a research chemist at one of the laboratories. It was she who doctored the fatal cough lozenge. All he then had to do was put it among the others and wait for his wife to consume it. I gather she sucked them all the time, so he wasn't going to have to wait very long. The only uncertainty was when and where, and he made various contingency plans to meet each situation. For instance, if she had died at home he would have immediately destroyed the packet from which the poisoned lozenge came."

"He certainly lost no time in setting me up as the fall guy," I remarked ruefully.

Jackley nodded. "When she returned home that first evening and told him how you'd offered her your lozenges, he quickly saw his opportunity for diverting suspicion. He not only made sure she took her own the next evening, but reduced the number in the packet so that she was bound to reach the fatal one in the course of the performance. Then, unbeknown to her, he put your tin of Buckland's lozenges at the bottom of her bag where it was bound to be discovered later."

"He's told you all this?"

Jackley smiled. "Once we picked up the bit of gossip about his association with the girl, we were able to apply pressure in the right place." He let out a sigh. "Murderers of his class often fail to foresee how they will react after the event. They envisage themselves as made of steel and discover too late that they're frightened jelly babies."

"Fortunately for you," I remarked drily.

"Oh, we have to apply the correct chemistry as well. I believe catalyst is the word. That's us." He finished his tea and rose. "Anyway, I thought you'd be interested to hear the outcome."

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"I'm much more than interested. I'm heartily relieved."

He laughed. "I'm afraid we shall need you as a witness at the trial."

"When will that be?"

"Some time next spring I would think."

"I'm going away in April for about ten days."

"Not Wagner again?"

I nodded. "In Vienna."

He shook his head in mock despair. "Some folk never learn, do they?"

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

CHINESE RESTAURANT

by PEGGY NOONAN

Rotund Charlie Dark,
While off on a lark,
Was offered lunch once, twice, and thrice.
Each time he refused;
Though hungry, he mused,
"I simply can't tolerate *Rice!*"

TRAVELOGUE

by PEGGY NOONAN

During dinner, charming Sir Mellory
Spoke of England (over the celery):
"In London I've been
"To visit the Queen."
"Elizabeth?" "No, I mean Ellery!"

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a ***NEW*** short story by

JOYCE HARRINGTON

Joyce Harrington in a purely serious mood . . . The economic affairs of the Taggerts were in such a desperate state that there was less than half a pound of coffee left and just enough flour for one more batch of biscuits. So Jennet Maybelle (Sweet Baby Jenny) went to work as a maid for the family of the town's one and only bank president, and learned of a secret almost too frightening to believe . . .

SWEET BABY JENNY

by JOYCE HARRINGTON

I never had a mother, leastways not one that I can remember. I must have had one sometime, 'cause as far as I can tell I didn't hatch out from no egg. And even chicks get to snuggle up under the hen for a little space before she kicks them out of the nest. But I didn't have no hen to snuggle up to, or to peck me upside the head if I did something wrong.

Not that I would ever do anything wrong. Leastways not if I knowed it was wrong. There are lots of things that go on that are pure puzzlement to me, and I can't tell the right from the wrong of it. For instance, I recollect when Ace—that's my biggest big brother and the one who taken care of us all after Pop went away—I recollect when he used to work driving a beer truck round to all the stores in town and the root cellar used to be full of six-packs all the time. I said to him one day, "Ace, how come if you got the cellar full of beer, I can't have the cellar full of Coke-Cola? I don't like beer." Guess I was about nine or ten years old at the time and never could get my fill of Coke-Cola.

Well, Ace, he just laughed and said, "Sweet Baby Jenny"—that's

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what they all called me even after I was well growed up—"Sweet Baby Jenny, if I drove a Coke-Cola truck you could float away to heaven on an ocean of it. Now, just drink your beer and learn to like it."

I wasn't ever dumb, even though I didn't do so good in school, so it didn't take much figuring to catch onto the fact that Ace was delivering almost as much beer to the root cellar as he was to Big Jumbo's Superette down on Main Street. So it didn't seem fair when I got caught in the five-and-dime with a lipstick in my pocket for him to come barreling down and given me hellfire and damnation in front of that suet-faced manager. I just stood there looking at him with pig-stickers in my eyes until we got out to the truck and I said to him, "What's the difference between one teensy-weensy lipstick and a cellar full of beer?"

He says to me, grinning, "Is that a riddle?"

And I says, "No, I would surely like to know."

And he says, "The difference, Sweet Baby Jenny, is that you got caught."

Now I ask you.

It was different, though, when he got caught. Then he cussed and swore and kicked the porch till it like to fallen off the house all the while the boys from the beer company was hauling that beer up from the root cellar and stowing it back on the truck. When they drove away, I says to him, sweet as molasses, "Ace, honey, why you carrying on so?"

And he says, "Dammit, Jenny, they taken away my beer. I don't give a hoot about the job, it was a jackass job anyway, but I worked hard for that beer and they didn't ought to taken it away."

"But, Ace," I says, hanging onto his hand and swinging it like a jumping rope, "ain't it true you stolen that beer and you got caught and you had to give it back just like I did with that lipstick?"

Well, he flung me away from him till I fetched up against the old washing machine that was resting in the yard waiting for somebody to fix it, and he yelled, "I ain't stolen anything and don't you ever say I did! That beer was what they call a fringe benefit, only they didn't know they was givin' it. They don't even pay me enough to keep you in pigtail ribbons and have beer money besides. I only taken what I deserve."

Well, he was right on one score. I didn't have anything you could rightfully call a hair ribbon, and I kept my braids tied up with the strings off of Deucy's old Bull Durham pouches.

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Deucy, you maybe guessed, is my second biggest big brother and a shiftless lazy skunk even though some people think he's handsome and should be a movie star. Ace's name in the family Bible is Arthur, and Deucy is written down as Dennis. Then there's Earl, Wesley, and Pembrook. And then there's me, Jennet Maybelle. That's the last name on the birth page. Over on the death side the last name written in is Flora Janine Taggert. It's written in black spiky letters like the pen was stabbing at the page, and the date is just about a month or so after my name was written on the birth page. I know that's my mother, although no one ever told me. And no one ever told me how she died. As for Pop, there ain't no page in the Bible for people who just up and go away.

Deucy plays guitar and sings and thinks he's Conway Twitty. Says he's gonna go to Nashville and come back driving a leopard-skin Cadillac. I'd surely like to see that, though I don't guess I ever will. That Deucy's too lazy to get up off the porch swing to fetch himself a drink of water. It's always, "Sweet Baby Jenny, get me this and get me that." Only thing he's not too lazy for is to boost himself up to the supper table.

That don't keep the girls from flocking round, bringing him presents and smirking like the pig that et the baby's diaper. They all hope and pray that they're gonna be the one to go to Nashville with him and ride back in that Cadillac. And he don't trouble to relieve their minds on the subject. You ought to hear that porch swing creak in the dark of night. They are just so dumb.

Now, Earl and Wesley, they try. They ain't too good-looking, though they do have the Taggert black hair and the Taggert nose. I remember Pop saying he was part Cherokee and all his sons showed it. But while Ace and Deucy came out looking like Indian chiefs, Earl is crosseyed and Wesley broke his nose falling out of a buckeye tree and lost most of his hair to the scarlet fever. So they try. They are always going into business together.

Once they went into the egg business and we had the whole place full of chickens running around. They said they would sell their eggs cheaper than anyone around and make a fortune and we'd all go off to California and live in a big hotel with a swimming pool and waiters bringing hamburgers every time we snapped our fingers. Well, people bought the eggs all right, but what Earl and Wesley kind of forgot about was that 200 chickens eat up a lot of chicken feed and they never could figure out how to get ahead of the bill at the feed store. I could have told them how to do it was

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raise the price of the eggs and make them out to be something special so everyone would feel they had to have Taggert's Country-Fresh eggs no matter what they cost. But Earl and Wesley just shoved me aside and said, "Sweet Baby Jenny, you are just a girl and don't understand bidness. Now go on out and feed them chickens and gather up them eggs and let's have some of your good old peach cobbler for supper. Being in bidness sure does make a man hungry."

Well, pretty soon the feed store cut off their credit and there wasn't nothing left to feed the chickens, so we had to eat as many of them as we could before they all starved to death and that was the end of the egg business. Earl and Wesley, being both tender-hearted and brought down by gloom, couldn't bring themselves to kill a single chicken. I like to wrung my arm off wringing those chicken necks. I used to like fried chicken, but I don't any more.

Pembrook, he's the smart one. He don't steal, sing, or go into business. He's off at the state college studying how to be a lawyer. He's the only one used to talk to me and I miss him. I was always planning to ask him what happened to our mother, how she died, and why Pop ran off like he did. But I just never got up the nerve.

Pembrook writes me letters a couple times a month, telling what it's like up there at the college. It sure sounds fine. He's always going on at me how I should go back to school and finish up and come to the college and learn how to *be* somebody. Well, I'd kind of like that, but who'd look after the boys? Reason why I didn't do so good in school was I never had no time for studying, what with looking after the boys like I was their mother instead of Sweet Baby Jenny like they call me. Only Pembrook never called me that.

Another thing I always meant to ask Pembrook and never did is how come I come out looking like a canary in a cuckoo-bird's nest. Pembrook looks more or less just like the other boys, though he keeps his black hair real clean and he wears big eyeglasses on top of his sharp Taggert nose. His eyes are dark brown like theirs, and he weathers up nice and tan in the summer sun. But in summer my freckles just get more so while the part in between the freckles gets red. And my hair, which is mud-yellow most of the time, gets brighter and brighter and kinks up in tight little curls unless I keep it braided up. And never mind my eyes. They're not a bit like the boys'. Greeney-blue or bluey-green depending on the weather. As for my nose, it couldn't be less Taggert if it was a pump handle. Small and turned up and ugly.

Could be I taken after my mother, though I don't know that for

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a fact 'cause I never set eyes on her nor saw any picture of her.

Pembrook says I'm pretty but that's just because he likes me. Pembrook says I look a lot like Miss Claudia Carpenter who is regarded as the prettiest girl in two counties, but I never saw her to make the comparison. She's the daughter of the town's one and only bank president. She's a year or so older than me, and she don't stick around much. Got sent away to school and always taking trips here and there. Can't be much fun, never being home in your own home place. Pembrook told me our mother used to help out at the Carpenter household, at parties and such or when their regular maid got sick. Maybe I could get such a job and put aside a little money, just in case I ever decide to do what Pembrook says.

One thing I do remember about Pop before he went away. He used to tell me stories. He used to sit himself down in his big maroon armchair and he would sit me down on his lap and he would say, "Now, listen. This here's a story about a bad little girl." The stories were always different but they were all about a girl named Bad Penny. She was ugly and mean and spiteful and nobody liked her. She was always making trouble and in the end she always got punished. Sometimes she got et up by the pigs and sometimes she got drowned in the creek. Once she got cut up in little bits by the disc harrow. And another time she fell into the granary and suffocated in the wheat. But she always came back, as mean and nasty as ever, and that's why she was called Bad Penny. After the story Pop would take me up to my room and put me to bed.

I liked the stories, even though they scared me some. I knew pigs didn't eat little girls, but I was always pretty careful around the pigpen. We don't keep pigs any more, but we had a few then and I used to carry the slops out to them.

Well, things got so bad after Ace robbed the gas station down at the crossroads and got recognized by Junior Mulligan who just happened to be having his pickup truck filled up with gas at the time and never did like Ace since the time they two went hunting together and Ace claimed it was *his* deer and knocked Junior into Dead Man's Gully and broken his leg. So off Junior went to the police and they come and drug Ace out of the Red Rooster Café where he was treating everyone to beer and hard-boiled eggs.

It was sad and lonesome around the place without Ace to stir things up, and quiet with Deucy's guitar in hock and him not able to sing a blessed note through mourning for it. Earl and Wesley tried selling insurance round about, but nobody we knew could buy

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any and the folks we didn't know wouldn't. So it was up to me.

I harked back to my idea of going as a maid like Pembrook had told me our mother had done. I didn't mind working in someone else's house, though Deucy said it was undignified and not befitting a Taggert. Far as I could see, Deucy thought any kind of work was undignified except maybe wearing out the porch swing. So one morning I washed my whole body including my hair, and cut my toenails so I could put shoes on, and got out one of our mother's dresses from the wardrobe in the attic, and made ready to go see Mrs. Carpenter. The dress fit me right well, though it was a little long and looked a bit peculiar with my high-top lace-up sneakers but that was all I had, so it would have to do.

I walked into town, fanning the skirt of the dress around me and blowing down the front of it from time to time so the sweat would not make stains on the green-and-white polkadots. I got to the Carpenter house before the sun got halfway up the sky, about the time Deucy would be rolling out of bed and yelling his head off for coffee. This was one morning he'd just have to find his own breakfast. I stood for a while with my hand on the iron gate looking up at the house. It was a big one, shining white like a wedding cake, and there must have been about two dozen windows on the front of it alone. It set back from the street on what looked like an acre of the greenest grass I ever saw sloping up to a row of prickly bushes that trimmed the porch.

I'd seen it before, times Ace used to take me riding in the beer truck and tell me how all he needed was to rob the bank and then we'd be living in this part of town alongside the rich folks. But I never really took a good close look, 'cause I thought he was joking. Now I looked until I got to shaking and wondering if I ought to march right up to the front door or sneak around to the back. I stood there so long I felt like my feet had taken root to the pavement, and if I could only get loose I'd run home and stay there forever.

But then I thought about how there was less than a half a pound of coffee left and just enough flour for one more batch of biscuits, and I pulled open that iron gate and set my face toward the big front door. It felt like an hour that I was walking up that path with my feet feeling like big old river rafts and my hair jumping out of the braids that I'd combed and plaited so neat. But I got up on the porch and put my finger on the doorbell and heard it ding-donging away inside. I waited. But the door stayed closed.

It was a pretty door, painted white like the rest of the house, and

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I studied every panel of it and the big brass doorknob and the letter box beside it while I waited. I wondered if I should ring the bell again. Maybe no one was home. Maybe I'd come all this way for nothing. They probably wouldn't want me to be their maid even if they were home. The green-and-white dress was sagging down around my shinbones and my sneakers were covered with road dust. Maybe I'd just go home and wait until I got a better idea.

I turned away and started down the porch steps, and then I heard the door open behind me and a sharp voice like a bluejay's said, "Yes?"

I looked back and saw a tall skinny woman staring at me with a frown betwixt her eyes that made me shiver in spite of the heat. "Miz Carpenter?" I said.

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Carpenter," she said. "Who are you? What do you want? I'm very busy."

My throat got choked and I couldn't swallow, so when I said, "I come to be your maid," I thought maybe she couldn't hear me, 'cause I couldn't hear me myself.

"What?" she said "Speak up. What's this about a maid?"

"I come to be it," I said. "If you'll have me."

"Well, sakes alive!" she said, showing all her yellow teeth. "If you aren't the answer to a prayer! Where did you spring from, and who told you to come here? Well, never mind all that. Come in the house and let's get started. You look strong. I just hope you're willing."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, and quick as a wink she drug me through the house and into the kitchen and right up to the sink where there was more dishes than I'd ever seen in my life and all of them dirty.

"Just start right in," she said. "The dishwasher's right there. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Now I'd seen dishwashing machines in the Sears Roebuck wish book, but I'd never been right up close to one. I knew what *it* was supposed to do. I just wasn't too sure what *I* was supposed to do. And I didn't trust anything very much except my own two hands. So I started getting those dishes as clean as I could before I put them in the machine, just in case we had a misunderstanding. They were the prettiest dishes I ever did see, even when they was all crusted with dried-up gravy.

Mrs. Carpenter came back in a few minutes carrying a pair of black shoes and a white dress. She plopped herself down on a kitchen chair and smiled at me. "What's your name, child?"

"Jennet Maybelle."

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She didn't let me get the Taggert part in, but went right on talking.

"Well, I'll call you Jenny. That Marcelline quit on me last night right in the middle of a dinner party, and I was just about to start calling around when you walked in the door. I'll pay you five dollars a day plus meals and uniform, but you have to pay for anything you break, so be careful with those dishes. Each plate cost twenty dollars."

I put down the plate I was holding and tried to think what it could be made of. It didn't look to be solid gold. Our plates at home were old and cracked and been around as long as I could remember. I didn't know what they cost. When one got broke we just threw it down in the creek bed behind the house along with all the other trash.

Mrs. Carpenter was still talking. "Now you can't be wearing those sneakers around the house, so I brought you an old pair of Claudia's shoes. Maybe they'll fit. And this uniform might be a little big for you, you're a skinny little thing, but we can cinch it in with a belt."

I didn't think much of her calling me skinny when she so closely resembled a beanpole herself. But I didn't say anything. The shoes looked nice with just a little bit of a high heel and shiny black, and the unifrom dress was starched and clean.

She stopped talking for a minute and started looking me over real close. Then, "Haven't I seen you somewhere before? I could swear your face is familiar. Where do you come from?"

I pointed in the direction of home and said, "Out Clinch Valley Road." I was going to tell her how my mother had once worked as a maid for her, but she didn't give me a chance. She jumped up, left the shoes on the floor and the dress on the chair, and shook her head.

"I don't know anyone out that way. You can change your clothes in the maid's room back there." She waved her hand at a door on the other side of the kitchen. "And when you finish the dishes you'll find me upstairs. I'll show you how to do the bedrooms."

The day wore on. I didn't break any dishes and figured out on my own which button to push to start the machine. It sure gave me a start when it began churning and spattering behind its closed door, and I prayed it wouldn't go breaking any of those twenty-dollar plates and blaming it on me. Mrs. Carpenter showed me all over that house and told me what I was to do. At noon, she showed me what to make for lunch. We both ate the same thing, cold roast beef

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left over from the night before and some potato salad, but she ate hers in the dining room and I ate mine in the kitchen.

I drank two glasses of ice-cold milk and could have drunk some more, but I didn't want to seem greedy. In the afternoon she set me to washing windows. It wasn't hard work, I worked harder at home, and it was a treat to be looking out at the roses in the back and all that green grass in the front while I polished those windows till they looked like they weren't there at all.

Along about four o'clock she hauled me back to the kitchen and told me what Mr. Carpenter wanted for his dinner. "He's very partial to fried chicken, but nobody seems able to make it to his satisfaction. I know I can't. And he has the most outrageous sweet tooth. I don't eat dessert myself, but he won't leave the table without it."

Well. I set to work cooking up my specialties. I'd had lots of experience with chicken, and my peach cobbler was just about perfect, if I say so myself. Mrs. Carpenter left the kitchen to take a nap after telling me that Mr. Carpenter expected to sit down to his meal at 6:30 sharp.

At 6:30 sharp I brought in a platter of fried chicken and Mr. Carpenter whipped his napkin into his lap and dug in. He didn't even look at me, but I looked at him. He was a freckly sandy man with gold-rimmed glasses and a tight collar. He still had all his hair, but it was fading out to a kind of pinkish yellowish fuzz. His eyes were blue, or maybe green, it was hard to tell behind his glasses, and his nose turned up at the end like a hoe blade.

I'd fixed up a mess of greens to go with the chicken and he dug into those, too, dribbling the pot liquor down his chin and swabbing it away with his fine napkin. Mrs. Carpenter pecked at her food and watched to see how he was liking his.

When I brought in the peach cobbler he leaned back in his chair and sighed. "That's the best meal I've had in years, Marcelline."

"This isn't Marcelline," said Mrs. Carpenter. "Marcelline quit last night. This is Jenny."

He looked at me then. First through his glasses and then without his glasses. And then he polished his glasses on his napkin and put them back on and tried again. "Ah, ha!" he said. "Jenny. Well. Very nice." And he got up from the table and left the room without even tasting my peach cobbler.

Mrs. Carpenter was after him like a shot. "Paul! Paul!" she hollered. "What about your dessert?"

It didn't matter to me. Peach cobbler is best while it's hot, but it's

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just as good the next day. I carried it back out to the kitchen, finished cleaning up, and got back into my going-home clothes. I did hope that Mrs. Carpenter would pay me my five dollars so I would have something to show to Deucy and Earl and Wesley, so I hung around for a bit.

But it wasn't Mrs. Carpenter who came into the kitchen. It was him. He stood in the doorway, pulling at his ear and looking at me as if he wished me off the face of the earth. Then he sloped into the kitchen and came right up to me where I was standing with my back against the refrigerator and took my chin in his hand. He held my face up so I had to look at him unless I closed my eyes, which I did for half a minute, but I opened them again because I was beginning to get scared. Then he put his hand on my shoulder and took the collar of my dress between his fingers and felt of it softly. At last he spoke.

"You're a Taggert, aren't you, girl?"

"Yes, I am. I'm Jennet Maybelle Taggert." I spoke up proudly because I'd learned in the little bit of time I'd spent in school that lots of folks thought Taggerts was trash and the only way to deal with that was not to be ashamed.

Then he said something I didn't understand. "Am I never to be rid of Taggerts? Will Taggerts hound me to my grave?"

"You look pretty healthy to me," I said, adding "sir" so he wouldn't think I was being pert.

He didn't say anything to that, but took his wallet out of his pocket and opened it up. I thought he was going to pay me my five dollars, so I got ready to say thank you and good night, but he pulled out a photograph and handed it to me.

"Who do you think that is?" he asked me.

Well, I looked but I didn't know who it was. The photograph was in color and it showed a girl about my age with yellow curling hair and a big smile. She was wearing a real pretty dress, all blue and ruffly, like she was going to a party or a dance. I handed the picture back to him.

"She's real pretty, but I don't know who she is."

"She's my daughter, Claudia."

I didn't know what else to say, so I said again, "She's real pretty."

"No, she's not," he said. "She's a spoiled brat. She thinks she's the most beautiful female creature that ever trod the earth. But she's useless, vain, and unlovable. And it's all my fault."

I didn't know why he was telling me all this, but it was making

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me fidgety and anyway I had to get home to get supper for the boys. They'd be pretty upset that I was so late. "Well," I said, "I guess I'll be getting along."

"Don't go." He grabbed my arm and hauled me over to where there was a mirror hanging on the wall and made me stand in front of it. "Look there," he said. "Who do you see?"

"Well, that's just me." I tried to pull away from him, but he held on tight.

"That's a pretty young woman," he said. "That's what a young woman is supposed to be, decent and clean and modest. I wish you were my daughter, Jenny Taggert, instead of that hellion who won't stay home where she belongs and behaves so no man in his right mind would marry her. How would you like that? Would you like to live here and be my girl?"

Well, I felt my neck getting hot, 'cause Ace had told me that when a man starts paying compliments there's only one thing he's after, and I'd sure heard enough of Deucy speaking sugar words to his ladies on the porch swing.

"Excuse me, Mr. Carpenter," I said, "but I got to be gettin' home and would you please pay me my five dollars so I can carry home some supper to those boys?" I know that was bold, but he was making me nervous and it just came out that way.

He let go of me and pulled out his wallet again. "Is that what Clemmie's paying you? Five dollars? Well, it's not enough. Here and here and here."

The bills came leaping out of his wallet and he stuffed them into my hands. When I looked, I saw I had three ten-dollar bills. Not only that, he started hauling out the leftover chicken that I had put away and shoving it into a paper sack.

"Take the peach cobbler, too," he said, "and anything else you'd like. Take it all."

"Now I can't do that. What would Miz Carpenter say?"

"I'll tell her I ate it for a midnight snack." He laughed then, but it wasn't a happy-sounding laugh. It sounded like something was breaking inside him.

"Thank you, sir," I said, and skedaddled out the back door before he could think up some new craziness that would get me into trouble.

His voice came after me. "You'll come back tomorrow, won't you?"

"Sure thing," I called back. But I wasn't so sure I would.

All the way home I pondered on Mr. Carpenter and his strange ways. But I just plain couldn't figure it out. All I could think was

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that having so much money had addled his mind and I thanked God that we was poor and couldn't afford to be crazy.

I put it all out of my mind, though, when I reached the dirt road that led up to our place. The moon was just clearing the top of the big old lilac bush at the edge of the property, and its kindly light smoothened away some of the ugliness you could see in daylight. The house looked welcoming with lights shining from its windows, and there in the dooryard was Pembrook's dinky little car. I ran up the porch and busted into the house, shouting his name.

They was all gathered in the kitchen and I could see from their dark Taggert faces that I had interrupted an argument. But I didn't care. I set the Carpenter food down on the table and said, "Here's supper, boys. Dig in." Deucy and Earl and Wesley did just that, not even bothering with plates but snatching up that chicken in their fingers.

Then I sat down and took off my left sneaker and pulled out the money. "There and there and there," I said, as I counted the bills out on the table. Deucy's eyes bugged out, and Earl and Wesley shouted, "Whoopee!" as best they could with their mouths full of drumstick meat.

Pembrook looked miserable.

"Where'd you get all that, Jenny?" he asked.

"I went as a maid," I told him.

"Where did you go as a maid?"

"To Miz Carpenter."

"And she gave you all that?"

I was about to lie and say she did, but I was never very good at lying. It makes my nose run. "No. He did."

"You're not to go there any more," said Pembrook.

Well, I'd just about decided that for myself, but I wasn't about to have Pembrook, much as I dearly love him, telling me what not to do. "I will if I want to," I said. "And when did you get home, and how long you staying for?"

"Forever, if I have to, to keep you out of trouble."

"That's pretty nice trouble," piped up Deucy. "Thirty dollars for a day's work and all this food. You ought to have some, Pem."

"Shut up, you idiot!"

I had never seen Pembrook so angry. Taggert blood boils easy, but until this minute Pembrook had always managed to keep his temper under control. He turned back to me, his eyes glittering and mean, like a chicken hawk about to pounce.

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"You are not to go back to the Carpenter house, not ever again. You are to put it right out of your mind. And tomorrow I am going to mail that money back. And that's the end of it."

I only said one thing. "Why?"

"Never mind why."

Well, that did it. I had worked hard for that money. Whether it was five dollars or thirty dollars, it was mine. The first money I had ever earned. And Pembrook had no right to take it away from me. I had done nothing wrong, as far as I could see, and it wasn't fair for him to punish me. I reared back in my chair, looked him square in the eye, and opened my mouth.

"Pembrook Taggert, in case you hadn't noticed, I am no longer Sweet Baby Jenny. I am a woman growed and able to make up my own mind about things. You can't stand there and give me orders and tell me to never mind why. I took it from Pop and I took it from Ace and I been taking it from these three, while you've been off at your college learning your way out of this mess. I ain't gonna take it no more."

The hard bitterness faded from his eyes and he took my two hands in his.

"You're right, Jenny," he said. "There are things you ought to know. Come out to the porch swing and I'll tell you."

"Don't make it a long story," Deucy called after us. "Ardith Porter's comin' over tonight and we got things to discuss."

But it was a long story that Pembrook told me. One that went back through the years to the time before I was born. All the boys knew it, but Pop had sworn them on the Bible never to tell me. It accounted for all the things I'd wondered about and never had the gumption to ask. If I had asked, they wouldn't have told me, although Pembrook said he was mighty tempted from time to time because it was my life and I had a right to know.

He told me that Pop wasn't my true father, that Mr. Carpenter was. He told me that about a month after I was born, our mother had told Pop the truth and packed her bag and said she was running off with Mr. Carpenter to have a better life than scratching around on a poor old dirt farm. He told me that Pop had choked the life out of her right there in the bedroom with me looking on with my blind baby eyes from the cradle beside the bed. And then Pop had gone to Mr. Carpenter and told him the whole thing and got him to hush it up because the scandal wouldn't have done anybody any good. They gave out that our mother had died of childbirth fever.

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The tears were rolling down my face, but I managed to ask, "How could you keep on living here, after he did that?"

"Well," said Pembrook, "Ace was the oldest and he wasn't but twelve. We had nowhere else to go. And he was our father."

"What happened then?" I asked. "Why did Pop run off?"

"He didn't," said Pembrook. "He lies buried under Mr. Carpenter's rose garden."

He went on to tell me how the years went by and Pop took up drinking and the farm went even further downhill until it was just a wasteland. Then one day Pop got it into his head that Mr. Carpenter ought to be paying money to take care of his child, meaning me. He went up to the Carpenter house, full of liquor and hate, and demanded a thousand dollars. Pembrook and Ace tagged along behind and listened outside the window of a room that was full of books and a big desk and a hunting rifle on the wall over the fireplace.

"I seen that room," I told him. "Miz Carpenter calls it his study."

Pembrook nodded. "That's where Pop got it."

He said how he and Ace heard them arguing in the room, and Mr. Carpenter shouted that it was blackmail and he wouldn't stand for it, and then there was a lot of scuffling around, with Pop shouting that he would kill Mr. Carpenter for ruining his life. And finally there was a shot. Just the one shot, but it was enough. They peeked over the window sill and saw Pop lying on the rug bleeding his life out, and Mr. Carpenter standing there like a statue with the rifle in his hands.

They were about to run away home, but Mr. Carpenter saw them and made them come into the house and help him carry Pop out to the rose garden. The three of them dug up the roses and put Pop in the ground and planted the roses back on top of him. Then Mr. Carpenter told them to get on home and keep their mouths shut or he'd have the marshal come and chuck us all off the farm and into reform school.

And they did, until this minute.

"I guess," said Pembrook, "I guess that's why Ace is so wild, but that's not the way to fix it up. That's why I'm studying to be a lawyer. One of these days I'll know how to take care of Mr. Carpenter legally and make it stick. So that's why I don't want you going back there, Jenny. You're likely to spoil my plan, and it isn't good for him to be reminded that you exist. I need to get him off guard when I'm ready."

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I wiped my eyes and blew my nose and said, "Thank you, Pembrook, for telling me. Now I understand."

"And you won't go back."

"I'm going to bed."

And I did. But I didn't sleep. I lay there pondering over the things that Pembrook had told me, trying to find the right and the wrong of it. Our mother was maybe wrong for pleasuring herself with Mr. Carpenter, but if she hadn't I wouldn't be here. Pop was wrong for taking life away from our mother, but she gave him cause in his eyes. Mr. Carpenter was wrong for shooting Pop, but the Taggert blood was up and Pop probably attacked him first. Hardest of all to think about was me being Mr. Carpenter's daughter. If it was true and he knew it, how could he have let me live all these hard years as Sweet Baby Jenny Taggert while that other girl, that Claudia, had everything her heart desired and then some?

Just before dawn I decided what to do. The boys, even Pembrook, were all sound asleep. I got up quiet as a mouse and dressed in our mother's green-and-white polkadot dress and my high-top sneakers and snuck out to the barn. The barn used to be a busy place, but it was still and empty that morning. No more cows to bellow for me to come and milk them, no horses to gaze sad-eyed after an apple or a carrot. Way in the back, behind the piles of rotten harness, in a dark corner draped over with cobwebs, I found what I was looking for.

It was a can of stuff that Pop used to put down to kill the rats that infested the barn and ate their way through the winter fodder. There wasn't much left in the can, and what there was looked dry and caked. Maybe it was so old it wouldn't even work any more. But I scooped some out with a teaspoon and put it into one of Deucy's Bull Durham pouches and set off down the road.

I kept up a good pace because I wanted to get there before Mr. Carpenter went off to the bank, and before the boys woke up and came after me in Pembrook's car. The morning was fresh and cool, and I didn't sweat one bit.

When I got to the Carpenter house, the milkman was just driving away. I went around to the back, picked up the two quarts of milk, and knocked at the back door. Mrs. Carpenter opened up. She looked sleepy-eyed but pleased to see me.

"Why, Jenny," she said, "you're here bright and early. Come in. Come in."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "I came to make breakfast."

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"Well, that's wonderful. Mr. Carpenter is shaving. He'll be down in a few minutes. He likes two four-minute eggs, I never can get them right, two slices of toast, and lots of strong black coffee. And now that you're here, I think I'll go back to bed and get a little more beauty sleep." She giggled like a silly girl, waved at me, and pranced out.

I put the milk away and started in making the coffee. There was an electric coffee pot, but my coffee is good because I make it the old-fashioned way. I boiled up some water and when it was bubbling away, I threw in the ground coffee, lots of it, to make it nice and strong. Then I turned the fire down to keep it hot while it brewed, and I cracked an egg so I could have an eggshell to throw in to make it clear. And I emptied out the stuff that was in the tobacco pouch right into the pot.

When I heard his footsteps on the stairs I put on another pot to boil up water for his eggs. He came into the kitchen smiling and smelling sweet.

"Well, Jenny," he said. "You came back. I'm glad, because you and I are going to get along just fine. You'll be happy here. I'll see to that."

I got out a cup and saucer.

"I been hearing things, Mr. Carpenter," I said. "Things I never dreamed of."

He frowned. "What things have you been hearing, Jenny?"

I poured coffee into the cup.

"I hear that you're my daddy."

He sank down into a kitchen chair. "Yes," he said, "that's true enough."

I put the cup and saucer on the counter to let it cool off a bit so it wouldn't be too hot for him to take a nice big swallow.

"I hear that you shot our Pop and buried him in your rose garden. They're mighty pretty roses you got out there."

He held his head in his two hands. "They swore never to tell you. Those boys swore."

"Pembrook told me because he's afraid I'll come to some harm in your house." I set the cup and saucer on the table in front of him.

"Oh, Jenny, sweet baby Jenny, I would never harm you. If anything, I'd like to make up for all those years I tried to put you out of my mind. I'd like you to come and live here and be my daughter and let me give you all the things you should have had."

"Don't call me that. I'm not a baby any more."

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"No, you're not. You're a fine lovely woman, just like your mother was. God, how I loved that woman! She was the only wonderful thing that ever happened in my whole life. I wanted to take her away with me. We were all set to go. We could have gone to some other town or to a big city where no one knew us. We'd have taken you along. And we'd have been happy. Instead, she died."

"Pop killed her. Because of you."

"You know that, too." He sighed. "Yes. He killed her and I killed him, and I've been living out my days in an agony of remorse. There's no one I can talk to. Clemmie doesn't know any of this. Sometimes I wish I were dead."

"Drink your coffee."

The water for his eggs was boiling. Gently I rolled the two eggs into the pot and stuck two slices of bread into the toaster. He left the table and came to where I was working.

"Jenny." He put his hands on my shoulders and turned me around to face him. "What can I do to make it up to you? I'll do anything in my power, and believe me that's a lot. You name it. It's yours."

I thought a minute. Would it be right or wrong to take from this man? I was having my usual trouble figuring out the difference between the two. Would it be right or wrong to let him drink the coffee?

Then I said, "Could you put Pembrook through law school?"

"Consider it done."

"And Earl and Wesley, can you find jobs for them? They're good workers, only down on their luck."

"Tell them to come to the bank."

"And what about Deucy? Would you get him a new guitar and a ticket to Nashville? He sings real fine."

"Not only that. I know Johnny Cash personally. We'll work something out."

"Now this one's hard. Can you get Ace out of jail and set him on a straight path?"

"The warden is Clemmie's cousin. And I own a ranch in Wyoming. He can go there and work off his wildness. But what about you, Jenny. What can I do for you?"

I shrugged. "Oh, I guess I'll just live here for a while. I can help Mrs. Carpenter and sort of keep an eye on things."

He hugged me and planted a big kiss on my cheek. "That's my girl," he said. "That's what I was hoping you'd say. You'll never regret it. Mmm, that coffee smells good."

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He was heading back to the table and his coffee cup. But I got there first and swiped it out from under his nose.

"That's coffee's cold," I said. "Come to think of it, the whole batch is bitter. I tasted it before you came down. I'll make some fresh."

I poured all the coffee down the drain and dished him up his eggs and toast. We drank the fresh coffee together, and he went off to his bank.

And that's the way it is now. Pembrook's way *is* better, and he's studying real hard. He'll graduate sooner now that he doesn't have to work his way through. Earl and Wesley really like being bank tellers, and Deucy has his leopard-skin Cadillac and all the girls he can handle, although he says he misses the porch swing. Ace sent a photograph of himself on a horse wearing a big old cowboy hat. He looks funny but he says he's doing fine.

And me? Every day while the roses are blooming I cut some and put them in the house. Mrs. Carpenter just loves them. I'm waiting. Someday us Taggerts are gonna dig up that rose garden.

"Q"

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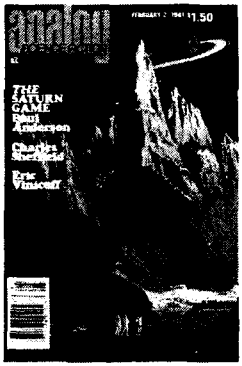

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

BORGES: Until now the reputation of Jorge Luis Borges as a mystery writer, for which he received a special Mystery Writers of America Edgar award in 1975, has rested—at least in America—on a handful of near-classic short stories including "Death and the Compass," "The Dead Man," "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," "The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths," and "The Garden of Forking Paths." (The latter story first introduced Borges to American readers when it appeared in Anthony Boucher's translation in the August 1948 issue of *EQMM.*)

All that will change this spring with the first English-language publication of a slim collection of short stories Borges wrote with his lifelong friend and collaborator, Adolfo Bioy-Casares. *Six Problems for Don Isidro Parodi*, to be published by Dutton in the translation of Norman Thomas di Giovanni, first appeared in Borges's native Argentina in 1942, under the pseudonym of H. Bustos Domecq, and was listed in *Queen's Quorum* (number 96). The title character is a Buenos Aires barber, wrongly jailed for murder, who solves bizarre mysteries without leaving his cell. One of the six stories, "The Twelve Figures of the World," has already been published in the Winter/Spring 1981 issue of the literary magazine, *Antaeus.*

NEW MYSTERY LINE: In these days when publishers are cutting back on their output and often discontinuing established mystery series, it's good news to report that Joan Kahn's first list of mysteries from Ticknor & Fields will be appearing this spring and summer. Leading off as the first "Joan Kahn Book" in May will be *Spend Game* by Jonathan Gash, a new mystery about British antiques dealer Lovejoy, who starred in Gash's 1977 award-winner, *The Judas Pair,* and two other novels.

It'll be followed in June by *Bogmail,* a suspense novel of the Irish countryside by Patrick McGinley. Coming in July is *The View from Deacon Hill* by Jack Scott, and in August there'll be *The Santa Claus Killer* by A. H. Garnet. This fall Joan Kahn will be publishing the 1981 MWA anthology, a collection of locked-room and impossible-crime stories edited by Edward D. Hoch. Tentative title: *All But Impossible!*

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LOST MYSTERIES FOUND: Just two issues ago I listed Carter Dickson's *The Department of Queer Complaints* as a "lost" mystery, a collection of fine stories unreprinted in its entirety since the first small edition of 1940. The good news this month is that Gregg Press will reprint the book in June in a hardcover edition with a new Introduction written by Richard Levinson and William Link.

Also coming from Gregg in June is another mystery I listed as "lost" last September: Cameron McCabe's 1937 novel *The Face on the Cutting Room Floor,* unpublished in America till now. It'll have a new Introduction by the author. Along with these two books Gregg is offering new editions of Raoul Whitfield's *Death in a Bowl* (1931), H. C. McNeile's *Bulldog Drummond* (1920), Carroll John Daly's *The Snarl of the Beast* (1927), and W. R. Burnett's *Little Caesar* (1929). (The 81-year-old Burnett is still writing and has a new novel coming from St. Martin's Press in April. It's called *Goodbye, Chicago.*)

WOLFE PACK: As this is being written there's cause for celebration among the Wolfe Pack, that group of writers and fans dedicated to celebrating Nero Wolfe and advancing the cause of good mystery writing generally. A Nero Wolfe series is appearing on television for the first time, based upon the original stories and starring William Conrad as the Stout sleuth for a run of at least eight weeks. I do want to mention one other aspect of the Wolfe Pack's activities. The group's annual Nero Wolfe Award for the "mystery novel which best typifies the standards set by Rex Stout" was recently presented to Helen McCloy for *Burn This*, published last year by Dodd, Mead.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: Janwillem van de Wetering, the popular Dutch mystery writer now living in America, has obtained permission from the estate of Robert Van Gulik to write a new novel about Judge Dee, continuing the fictional adventures of the historical magistrate who solved mysteries in seventh-century China. Houghton Mifflin is expected to be the publisher.

Mysterious disappearances play a large part in two new books on Atheneum's summer list. *Without a Trace* by Jack Harris, coming in June, is a nonfiction account of eight famous mysteries of the sea, including the *Mary Celeste,* the sinking of the *Maine*, and the lost Arctic expedition of Sir John Franklin in 1847. In July, Jack Olsen's novel *Missing Persons* deals with a man whose wife walks into the City Justice Building to pick up some typing and never comes out.

John D. MacDonald's nineteenth Travis McGee novel, *Free Fall in Crimson*, is coming from Harper & Row this spring.

And last year's MWA president, William P. McGivern, has a new novel, *Summitt, on the summer list* from Arbor House.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

"I've had to play a sort of tomboy, drive fast cars across country lanes, and climb down ivy," pert Cheryl Campbell told EQMN about her role as Lady Eileen Brent—called Bundle—in Agatha Christie's *The Seven Dials Mystery*, coming to television in a three-hour adaptation as part of the Mobil Showcase Network in April. In addition, she has to wear cloche hats and motor goggles (the setting is the 1930s, pushed up a few years from when Christie wrote the book, immediately after *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*), tackle a secret society, and be resourceful and very brave. Cheryl is a delight, and the evening itself is fun. It also marks the first time a work of Agatha Christie's has been made into a television feature film to be seen in this country.

Until recently, the Christie heirs had consistently refused to release the TV rights to her books. Then London Weekend Television, after more than a year of negotiations and fierce international competition (including Warner Brothers), was allowed to do a television version of another Christie thriller, *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?* Meticulously produced in period setting, *Evans* was such a success that the estate relented and rights to *Dials* followed. (Books involving the famed series characters, Poirot and Marple, had already been purchased by British EMI for theatrical movie production.) Now both *Dial* and *Evans* are coming to U.S. television, each with an introduction by Peter Ustinov—the new Hercule Poirot, and Charlie Chan as well—walking through the author's home and her beloved English countryside.

Not the least of *Seven Dials'* pleasures is Cheryl Campbell, no stranger to television mystery. She was the seductive, deceptive Madeleine in the superb PBS *Malice Aforethought*, the mousy, murderous schoolteacher in *Pennies from Heaven*. As "Bundle" Brent, she is quite different, a youthful upperclass madcap pursuing pleasure, but with a serious underside. When a house guest dies in the family's country estate, Bundle's father (John Gielgud as the crusty Marquis) is merely grumpy about it: "People don't need to die in my house—at least not strangers." But it sets Bundle to sleuthing, especially when she runs into a second corpse—almost quite literally—as her sportscar careening down a village lane narrowly misses a figure stumbling before her, a dying man muttering something about "seven dials."

Aiding her in amateur detection are her boy friends, all upperclass British "blokes" who know one another, it seems, through "gentlemanly" jobs at the Foreign Office. And Foreign Office counsel is what's needed, for this *is* a thriller, and the pre-war calm of those lovely country houses (the show was taped in lush locations in Oxfordshire) will soon be shattered.

Why Didn't They Ask Evans? follows *Dials* to American television on

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the Mobil Showcase, and similarly is set in period, features a spunky titled heroine (Francesca Annis as Lady Frances Derwent), and revolves itself around a dying message. A young man is playing golf at Wales' famed coastal links—the view of the sea is breathtaking—when a stray ball leads him to a grim discovery: a man near death, crumpled on the cliff rocks, murmuring with his last breath: "Why didn't they ask Evans?"

Why indeed? The answer leads golfer Bobby and Lady Fran on a pursuit through Wales and England to such locations as sinister nursing homes, more stately houses, croquet lawns, and aerodromes. While Christie's formal whodunits were always well constructed and tight, her thrillers were more lighthearted, less plotted and planned, gliding you from adventure to adventure with easy grace. They make good television fare, and are served well by these two productions.

Horace Rumpole, the graying warhorse of Old Bailey, is far removed from Christie between-the-wars dramatics, but what a pleasure it is to have him back for six more episodes on *Mystery!*, the PBS television anthology series devoted to our genre now back for its second season. For the bombastic but kind-hearted Rumpole, crime does not pay enough—for he cannot chuck his barrister's wig and retire, and must this year defend clients as diverse as an actress accused of the backstage murder of her husband (who hires Horace because she thinks it will be "good casting") and a retiree caught with stolen religious art worth half a million pounds. In this episode, "Rumpole and the Age of Retirement," the corpulent curmudgeon must face the possibility of slowing down to a halt himself, but author John Mortimer (himself a lawyer) and actor Leo McKern seem agreed that Rumpole may well rant and trumpet on forever. Now being shot in preparation for *next* season on British television is a special two-hour episode in which Rumpole encounters crime while visiting his offspring (and searching out tea and port) in Miami, Florida!

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INTERVIEW: JOYCE HARRINGTON (2)

This is the conclusion of an interview that began in the previous issue.

EQMN: You were an actress.

HARRINGTON: Yes, and the acting years were lots of fun. From them I think I learned the kind of dedication that carries me through to this day. If you're in a play, no matter how large or small your role is, you have to *be there* and you have to do the best you possibly can. I guess that's been the central theme of my life—Be There With The Goods.

EQMN: No regrets?

HARRINGTON: If I have any regrets it's that I didn't start writing earlier. Actually, I did, but it was during my obsession with the theater. I wrote some plays—one-acts and

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about half a full-length play—now forever lost and it's probably a good thing. I don't spend much time regretting because, Pollyanna that I am, I believe nothing is wasted.

EQMN: You have a special gift for portraying regional people. Have you ever traveled with that in mind?

HARRINGTON: No, I've never gone "location hunting." I have to live in a place, breathe the air, eat the food, listen, and watch. The one thing that's constant is that human emotions are pretty much the same everywhere, though the love objects—goals, aspirations, whatever the conflict is about—may differ. But the voices are certainly many and varied, and that's what I try to capture. The one "regional" person I'm still trying to pin down is the New Yorker. That's really tough because the New Yorker is so many different people all at once.

EQMN: How do you feel about New York as a place to live?

HARRINGTON: I love it. Oh, sure, I deplore it sometimes, as when the subway stops between stations and the loudspeaker crackles some undecipherable message about why we're not moving, or when some out-of-towner tells me how dirty it is and I have to admit that it is. But there's something about New York that transcends all the inconveniences of living here. San Francisco is a beautiful city and Los Angeles is indescribable—I've lived in both. I've spent summers in Michigan, lived in Ohio and West Virginia and on a small farm in southern Missouri. But I keep coming back to New York.

EQMN: Do you have any favorite form of recreation, any unfulfilled dreams?

HARRINGTON: The way my life is set up right now, writing *is* my recreation. Next to that, reading. One tends to get pear-shaped with all that sitting around the center of gravity. In this age of physical fitness, I'm a misfit. I left my gym shorts in San Francisco.

However, when it comes to unfulfilled dreams I could write a book. Maybe I will. Well, they're really daydreams and the best part about them is that they *are* unfulfilled. Actually, I'm not displeased about being myself. That doesn't mean I'm *satisfied* with myself. I've always been painfully shy and I still am, although I've learned ways to compensate for that.

And there are so many things I don't know, or know how to do. I'm sure I'll never learn how to speak Greek or play the piano or do cartwheels or ride a horse, all things I've tried at one time or another. When I was younger, I was very angry about being a girl. Boys had all the fun. Girls got to play with dolls and grow up to be mommies or teachers or nurses. I'm afraid I dismembered all my dolls and got into fistfights with boys who teased me. But I'm glad to be a woman now, with all the changes that are happening for women. It's harder now to do all the things you expect of yourself, but it's a lot more interesting than when your expectations were set by someone else.

EQMM: Tell us more about the kind of child you were.

HARRINGTON: I was puny, or so they told me. I didn't feel puny, but I did manage to have every childhood illness that was popular at the time. Maybe that's how I started reading so much. I went through

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whole categories of fiction at a gulp. Historical novels. Science fiction. Dickens was a cherished category of his own, as was Melville. The first mystery book I owned was Ellery Queen's *There Was an Old Woman.* It was given to me by my sixth grade classmates when I was home sick with pneumonia. I must have read it a dozen times.

I was born in Jersey City, New Jersey, and when I was about five or six we lived in an apartment building overlooking the Hudson River and the skyline of Manhattan, and I spent a lot of time daydreaming at the window about the marvels of that beautiful town across the river. One of my popular daydreams was that in my old age I would become a boarding-house keeper with bright-red hair and a house full of bizarre boarders. Wouldn't that make a nice TV sitcom? Or a series for *EQMM?*

THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Many of the famous male detectives of fiction have come equipped with wives. Some of them (Mrs. Alleyn, Mrs. Appleby) have had fairly prominent parts to play. Many, though (Mrs. Fell, Mrs. Fen, Mrs. French), are inconspicuous to the vanishing point. Female detectives, on the other hand, though seldom married, have usually had strong male figures to share the spotlight and frequently rescue them from danger. The growing feminism of recent years, however, has effected some changes, and women detectives have been allowed to take center stage as never before. In the books listed below, for example, we have three women sleuths with notably insignificant husbands, plus an unmarried private investigator who is both stronger and smarter than her male partner-Watson.

*** Janice Law: *Death Under Par*, Houghton Mifflin, $9.95. In a nice switch on the domestic relations of earlier series, Anna Peters is a professional detective with an artist-husband. Her latest smoothly told case is set against the background of a British Open at St. Andrew's. Besides the golfers, there is an eccentric professor of linguistics whose menacing alter ego, known as Wulf, walks the streets of the university town armed with a javelin. The ending hints at another sports-oriented Peters case to come, an attractive prospect.

*** Anne Morice: *Death in the Round*, St. Martin's, $8.95. Though actress Tessa Crichton may owe some of her interest in crime to policeman-husband Robin, the detecting chores are hers alone in a well written and refreshingly conventional, formal whodunit involving an English repertory theatre and the death of its eccentric elderly owner.

*** Joseph Mathewson: *Alicia's Trump*, Avon, $2.25. Alicia von Helsing, stylish Manhattan matron, is a new amateur sleuth whose surgeon-husband Eric is the most obscure

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spouse of the lot. The first-person telling is very nice, with ample humor and suspense and well drawn odd-ball characters. The complicated plot involves Tarot cards, clairvoyance, and other occult matters.

*** Reed Stephens: *The Man Who Killed His Brother*, Ballantine, $1.95. The protagonist here is Mick Axbrewder, who (in the honored tradition of drunken and/or guilt-ridden defrocked private eyes) sobers up to search for the missing thirteen-year-old daughter of the brother he inadvertently shot. But his partner, tough female dick Ginny Fistoulari, is a much sharper detective. They form a combo I suspect (and hope) we'll see again. Stephens does a fine storytelling job, but the conversation of his Chicano cop wins this department's first annual Tin Ear Award.

*** Kathleen Kinder: *The Raven and the Dove*, St. Martin's, $8.95. A new English writer presents a chillingly effective variant on the customary gothic trappings, more in the vein of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* than typical romantic suspense. The traditional old mansion houses an odd triangle: the mad and murderous mistress, the well meaning but vacillating husband, and the plucky servant girl, considered feeble-minded because of a condition unnamed in 1876: dyslexia. The skilled manipulation of atmosphere marks Kinder as a writer to watch.

*** Richard Grayson: *The Monterant Affair*, St. Martin's, $9.95. Gautier of the Sûreté investigates the poisoned-chocolate murder of a celebrated actress in turn-of-the-century Paris. This is an entertaining and colorful effort in the historical-procedural category, a rarer hybrid than might be imagined.

*** Murray Sinclair: *Tough Luck L.A.*, Pinnacle, $2.50. Style, character interplay, and a vividly realized Southern California background are the most prominent features of this pleasant, readable, sentimental-tough novel with a writer as hero and an old reliable mystery gimmick activating a relatively thin plot.

*** Leonard Tourney: *The Players' Boy Is Dead*, Harper and Row, $10.95. Like so many contemporary detective novels, this one too is much stronger on character and background than plot. The setting is Elizabethan England and the victim that member of an itinerant theatrical troupe who takes the women's parts. Local constable Matthew Stock is a likeable and believable sleuth, and the mannered period dialogue is nicely done.

** George Bellairs: *Devious Murder*, Walker, $9.95. Superintendent Littlejohn, in the good grey Inspector French tradition of British police detectives, finds a body while walking his dog in his first U.S. appearance in several years. The enterprise is sound and readable, with a neat solution that shuns major pyrotechnics, but it ultimately seems to burn on slightly too low a flame.

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"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 577th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . .

From the author's letter of September 9, 1980: "I am 12 years old—this is my first story I've ever submitted. I live in Northern California and have just started Junior High School (Mission Hill). My hobbies are photography, stamp collecting, and I love mysteries."

The only changes we have made in Douglas Carlson's story are a few changes in punctuation and one correction in grammar . . .

THE NEW MANAGER

by DOUGLAS CARLSON

I've been working for the Rockford Construction Company for over five years. Last week the old construction manager quit his job. I hear he went over to that other company across town. I was offered the job of the construction manager a few days ago, but I refused it—too much responsibility involved. Now I regret my refusal.

The new manager—Chuck, I think his name is—is driving everybody crazy. None of us knows where he's come from. He seems to want to change everything to "make it more efficient" around the construction site. We are building this house for this rich guy who wants to retire here. Every night we have to pack everything "just so" into the tool shed. That's a pain in the neck. In the morning Chuck opens it. Then he calls all of us over and hands out all of the tools.

All of this business with Chuck is really getting to my nerves. One day on the second floor I forgot to put the frame in for a window. I got bawled out by that Chuck guy. The next day the boss called me into the company's office-trailer. He asked me what's wrong. I told him that the new manager is driving me and the others crazy.

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"They don't look bothered at all compared to you. If you don't like it around here you can find another job. Chuck is staying." We sat silent for a minute or two. Then he spoke up again. "Any more mistakes and you're fired!"

That evening I got to thinking some sinister plots to get rid of that Chuck for good. "Well, he opens the tool shed every morning, maybe I could put a bomb connected to the door of the tool shed set to explode when the door is opened. When he opens it, everything will be back to normal!"

During the next day's lunch hour I snuck away to Chuck's desk in the trailer. I found the padlock key. When the day was over, I left with the other guys, as usual.

A few hours later, when it was dark, I came back to the construction site with the bomb. I opened the tool shed and set the trap.

I didn't sleep one wink that night. I kept thinking about whether I should be doing this. But it's too late to disconnect it.

The next morning the boss said to me, "Frank, go open the tool shed. Chuck called in sick." And he handed me the key.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 578th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . about a detective's "smallest case—a miniature masterpiece, you might say" . . .

The author, Reg Bellury, was thirty-seven years old when he submitted his first story. He is an assistant district attorney for an eight-county circuit in Middle Georgia. A native of Florida, he has lived in eleven states and in Europe. Although he occasionally bowls, and plays golf and bridge, he spends most of his leisure time reading . . .

LEAVE IT TO McNABB

by REG BELLURY

I had listened to the argument ebb and flow for twenty minutes or so in silence. Half listened, really, for I knew the answer and had only bided my time until I could make my case. The detectives slouched around the booking desk, listening to Duffy who was trying to convince his colleagues that he was better than any plainclothes officer who had ever worn a badge in the city. I refilled my coffee cup and eased back to the group.

"Sorry, fellows, you're all wrong," I said. I could feel the tension rise. I had once been on the force here, but now I was a private investigator. In my former colleagues' eyes I was only a gumshoe. Never mind that I operated nationally and made more money in a year than several of them put together. No matter that I never took sleazy cases. I was not wearing a badge and as far as they were concerned, that was that.

"I admit you're all pretty good," I said. "Only trouble is, you've overlooked a man who used to work here and was so good that by comparison you look like Keystone Kops."

Anders had been leaning with his elbows on the desk. He stood

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up abruptly. "Oh, come on, Ryan, *you* aren't going to claim to be—"

I held up my hand to shut him off. "Certainly not, Anders. I wouldn't think of tooting my own horn. No, I'm going to tell you about the finest piece of work by the best detective who ever wore a badge in this city, namely O. O. McNabb. I doubt that any of you have ever heard about it since it was also his smallest case—a miniature masterpiece, you might say. It just so happens that I played a minor role in the case and can tell you all about it."

Ten years ago (I began) I was still in college, about ready to be graduated with a criminal-justice degree and working midnight to eight for Guardian Security over at Southside Hospital. The kitchen help came to work around five in the morning and I stood guard at the back entrance until they all arrived and were inside. That's when I first learned about the case.

I had been standing in the parking lot for nearly an hour and all the help were accounted for except Hattie Mae, one of the cooks, and the Greek. I liked the Greek and was the only person at the hospital who called him by his name, Vilis Zoomopolis, and probably the only person who knew it, other than the personnel director.

Vilis had been a policeman in Greece but now he was working as a dishwasher.

I generally sneaked into the doctors' lounge around six a.m. and waited for Vilis to arrive with his cart to clean up the dishes and coffee cups left over from the night before. Doctors were never around at that time of morning and it was off limits to nurses, so Vilis would bring Danish rolls from the kitchen and make a fresh pot of coffee for us while we sat around and compared police work in Greece with that in America. Vilis would run his hand through his short, curly black hair and say, "Police not soft in Greece, Ryan. We catch crook—boom!" He always emphasized the last word by slamming his right fist into his left palm.

I had expected Vilis to arrive earlier than usual, since he now owned a car, which he had bought for an even $3000 in cash. That seemed a little steep to me for a 1969 Ford LTD, especially for a man with wages as low as Vilis', but that was his business.

He had bought the car from a used-car dealer named Farley, who rented the house in front of Vilis' garage apartment. I had been mildly surprised, since Vilis had several times grumbled that Farley was a bad neighbor, although he had never elaborated. Vilis only shrugged. "Farley no good, but car okay," he said.

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Expecting the LTD that morning, I didn't see Vilis until he passed under the street light nearly a block away. I could almost hear his feet pounding the sidewalk. Vilis was only five feet six or so and looked fat, but wasn't. He had a bulldog build—short legs, massive chest, and powerful, stubby arms. He could go "boom" all right.

I left my post to meet Vilis in the doctors' lounge. He was in a hurry—I could hear the dishes rattling in his cart as he came down the hall.

He began talking before the doors had swung shut behind him. "You got to help, Ryan. I need police. You only police I know who will help. You my friend."

I was a friend, all right, but I wasn't a policeman. Not yet, anyway, but I had never been able to convince Vilis of that. I wore a uniform, I had a fancy badge, and I packed a .38. Therefore I was a cop.

"Okay, Vilis, so what's the problem? Here, let's get some coffee and Danish and tell me all about it. By the way, where's your new car?"

Vilis slopped coffee into cups, and waving his hand with a cup still in it, spilled some coffee onto the floor. "That's why I need help, Ryan. My car stolen."

"No kidding? So why don't you report it to the police?"

Vilis slammed the cup onto the counter.

"I go to police, Ryan," he said. His expression darkened at the memory. "I go to police station last night." He lapsed into Greek, which I didn't understand, but it was clear that he had got no help from the neighborhood precinct.

With some difficulty Vilis turned his attention back to the present. "But you policeman. You my friend, Ryan. You get my car back. Talk to Farley and get my car back."

"But I thought you said it was stolen. Why should I talk to Farley?"

With an exaggerated air of patience Vilis put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Farley sold car to me. Farley steal car from me."

"How do you know that, Vilis? Did you see him take it?"

Vilis strengthened his grip on my shoulder. "He crooked man, Ryan. In Greece we catch Farley and"—Vilis slammed his fist into his palm.

He smiled for the first time that morning. "We catch Farley and find car, okay?"

It wasn't okay with me. I figured it was a job for the police department and I was confident they could do a far better job than I could.

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"Let the police find it, Vilis," I said. "Let them talk to Farley or whoever."

Vilis grabbed me by both shoulders. His voice lowered almost to a whisper. "No papers, Ryan. Farley still has papers. Police won't help without papers. But you my friend. You don't need papers."

I was incredulous. "You mean you don't have a title to the car? Farley didn't give you one? How about a tag receipt or a bill of sale?"

Vilis was shaking his head and smiling while I questioned him. I understood. Vilis had gone to the police station without anything to show that he even owned a car. He probably had not even been able to tell them what make and model it was, let alone give them an identification number.

"Okay, Vilis," I sighed, "sit down and tell me the whole thing from the beginning."

In a few minutes I had it straight. Vilis had paid the $3000 to Farley in cash on Tuesday evening. Vilis had asked for papers of some sort but Farley had shrugged off the request, saying that it would take several days for him to get the title but for Vilis not to worry. Vilis had driven the car to work on Wednesday morning, when he had shown it to me. He had parked it in the driveway, next to Farley's house, on Wednesday night. He had then walked three blocks to the grocery store, as was his habit every evening, and had returned to find his car gone. So was Farley.

It looked like a clean job, all right. I had never met Farley, but judging from Vilis' sketchy comments in the past it would fit neatly with his character. Farley apparently had figured that it would come down to nothing but his word against a poor Greek dishwasher who spoke little English. He was probably familiar with the police-station procedure and had anticipated the brushoff Vilis had received when he had reported his car stolen. It was all pretty slick.

"Vilis, let's go see Farley this afternoon." I slapped my fist into my palm, showing much more confidence than I felt.

I met Vilis at his apartment at four o'clock and without any plan we went to Farley's front door. A woman answered. I assumed she was Farley's wife, but Vilis later told me that they only lived together. Her name was Myra and she was pretty in a frail sort of way, like a small female bird. I wondered if her husband would be a brightly plumed male, strutting and preening.

When Farley came in some ten minutes later, I discovered I had guessed wrong. He had not strutted into the room, he had slunk into it. Nor was there any plumage. Everything about the man was

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brown, from his shoes to his slicked-back hair. He had the complexion of a man who spent a good deal of time in the sun, and his clipped mustache so closely matched his skin tone that it had no definition. Only his eyes varied—they were green. This was clearly no innocent bird. What we had, I decided, was a weasel.

Farley warily eyed the woman on the sofa, glanced at Vilis in the far corner, and practically ignored me. I stood up and introduced myself. We did not shake hands.

The only available seat in the living room was on the sofa, next to Myra. Farley walked into the kitchen, brought back a plastic chair, and sat down. "What can I do for you?" he asked. The green eyes darted from me to Vilis, who sat impassively.

"The car you sold Vilis was stolen yesterday evening. Right out of the driveway," I began. Farley reacted with proper surprise, but it seemed to me a bit strong.

"Stolen? From the driveway? You gotta be kidding," he said to me. Glancing at Vilis, he said, "Are you sure it's gone?" Without waiting for an answer, he asked, "When was it taken?"

"Yesterday evening, right out of the driveway," I repeated, with a touch of emphasis on each word.

Farley whistled. "Gets worse every day. Right out of the driveway, huh?" His face shifted slowly to exaggerated concern.

He turned to Vilis again. "What can I do?" he said, holding his arms out, palms up, in a gesture of helplessness.

I spoke sharply. "You can give him a title."

I thought I detected the first hint of genuine concern in his eyes. He looked at Myra. She appeared to be carefully examining the ashtray on the coffee table in front of her. Farley pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket, lit a cigarette, and inhaled deeply. He exhaled in the direction of the ceiling.

"It seems to me that right now we should worry about getting the car back, instead of a title, don't you?"

"We can't get the car back without a title," I said. "Vilis needs it to give the police information."

At the mention of police Myra shifted her position on the sofa just perceptibly. Farley noticed it too. "Myra, get me a drink, will you?" Obediently Myra went to the kitchen.

"Getting the title will take some time, you know," Farley said. He obviously felt on home ground here. "Red tape, you know."

"What takes time about putting your signature on a title? All you do is sign it over on the back and have it notarized. It takes

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what—two minutes?" I felt comfortable here too. I had bought four cars in my lifetime, all used.

Farley was unruffled. "Well, the fact is, the title is at the office at the lot. I just haven't been able to find it. But I'm sure it'll turn up."

"Well, how about a bill of sale, then?" I pressed. I knew it was no substitute for a title, but at least it would be some kind of proof that the sale had taken place.

"I'd be glad to, but I don't know what the identification number is. No point in a bill of sale without that. Besides, you know yourself that it won't do you a bit of good legally." He was beginning to feel in control, almost expansive. "Don't worry, uh, Ryan, I'll find the title."

An idea had begun to form in my mind when Myra reacted to the mention of police. If Farley knew anything about the local police, he knew O. O. McNabb's reputation. Every crook in the city knew McNabb, most of them personally.

"Well, Farley, if you can't help us I guess we'll just have to go back to the police."

Interpreting my statement as a defeat, Farley smiled for the first time. "They'll be able to help you, I'm sure."

"I'm sure they will, Farley. It's just a matter of getting them interested in the case. Vilis has already been down there, but he didn't have the information they needed. I think I can give them a little more." I locked into the green eyes. "Besides, I've got a real good friend who's a detective."

Farley studied the smoke rising from his cigarette. "That's good, I hope he can help, but I don't think I would count on it too much if I were you."

"I wouldn't, except my friend is O. O. McNabb. If that car and the low-down weasel who took it can be found, O. O. McNabb can find them."

Farley quickly glanced up. "Yeah, I'm sure he can, if he's interested. But I hear that McNabb doesn't fool around with anything less than murder cases and stuff like that."

"That's true, Farley, but he's a friend of mine. Actually, he's a friend of the family. He and my father were in the Marines together during the war. My father saved his life in the South Pacific. They've been very close ever since. O. O. never had any kids and I'm sort of—well, he's like my uncle. Besides, O. O. likes a challenge and this case looks like it might be one. He'll love it." I glanced at my

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watch. "I'm eating dinner at his place tonight, so it'll be a good time to tell him about it."

I got up as if to go. Farley again blew smoke toward the ceiling, but more slowly this time, like air escaping from a punctured beach ball.

"Hold on a minute," Farley said. The smug look was gone. "Maybe we can do something. No need to bother McNabb. What the hell, I've got all kinds of contacts in the car business. After all, whoever took it is going to try to sell it, right?"

"Not without a title, Farley, and you've got that."

"Well, yeah, that's right, but what the hell, it still ought to turn up somewhere. Give me a little time to see what I can do."

"But, Farley, O. O. will enjoy the case." I was beginning to enjoy it myself. "No telling how much fun he would have with it. No telling what else it might lead to, either. Big-time stuff. A stolen-car ring maybe. I'll leave it to McNabb."

Farley began to look desperate. "Tell you what, man, let me have twenty-four hours. If I can't turn it up in twenty-four hours, I'll"—he groped for a suitable and convincing clincher—"I'll go talk to McNabb with you."

I pretended to think it over. "Okay, I'll check with Vilis tomorrow at"—I looked at my watch— "five-thirty. If he has the car—and the title—great. If not, it's O. O.'s case."

Farley's relief was obvious. "Like I said, no problem with the title. It's at the office somewhere. I'll see if some of my contacts can turn up the car."

I turned to Vilis. "Let's go."

Outside Vilis trotted along to keep up with me as I hurried to get away. "What you think, Ryan? What you think?"

"We'll see, Vilis. We'll know by tomorrow at this time."

Thursday morning in the parking lot I heard Vilis before I saw him. The car horn's raucous sound started just before Vilis rounded the corner a block down and honked intermittently until he drew even with my position.

After parking, Vilis jumped out of the car and waved a title in my face. "You make good policeman, Ryan. You going make best policeman in city. You going to be better than your friend McNabb. Come on, I make you real Greek breakfast this morning. I bring food from home. Come with me, inside."

Over breakfast Vilis explained that Farley had knocked on his door at nine o'clock the night before and had given him the title,

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properly notarized, and said that a friend of his had found the car, abandoned but undamaged, in another section of the city.

Anders and the other detectives had listened attentively. Duffy spoke up.

"That's pretty good, Ryan. Ol' McNabb always was a wizard. Had more informers than anybody I ever knew." He paused thoughtfully. "By the way, what did McNabb think about the case?"

"Don't know, Duffy. I never told him about it."

"Why not?"

"I never met him. He retired a couple of months before I was sworn in."

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

NURSERY CRIME: I

by KATHLEEN HERSHEY

I know it's a fact, I read it on paper
That Jack climbed the beanstalk to pull off a caper.
He robbed the poor giant again and again
Of bags of gold, a harp, and a hen.
He then killed his victim and nobody moaned it
And what's worst of all, his mother condoned it.

NURSERY CRIME: II

by KATHLEEN HERSHEY

I really do think it's a shame
That Hansel and Gretel got fame.
They carelessly littered the woods
And stripped a house of its goods.
They baked a witch at four-twenty,
Three-fifty would have been plenty!

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a *NEW* short story by

ERNEST SAVAGE

Let us quote Winston Churchill to describe this story: "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma" . . . But slowly, slowly, the truth will reveal itself . . .

DANGEROUS GROUND

by ERNEST SAVAGE

Mayor Jimmy Dale was delivering the eulogy for Chief Bill Hansen and doing his usual mellifluous job. Frank Pardee, looking attentive, but hearing mostly the music, the honey of Dale's voice, had deliberately placed himself at the fringe of the large throng of mourners. Frank was a farmer and disliked the brush of elbows against his ribs—but it was not only that; almost, he'd decided not to come at all.

"—whose courage was legendary, whose tenacity in the pursuit of miscreants was—"

Pardee smiled. "Miscreants" was a word that only a man of Dale's vintage would use. But they were all old men now, Pardee, Dale, Hansen. And old women—Mrs. Hansen, the mourning-bedecked widow, one month to the day younger than Pardee, who was 66. Pardee smiled again. He hadn't thought of that slight anniversary oddity for nearly fifty years. Once, in high school, in one of those puppy-love gambits, they'd vowed to celebrate jointly the 15th day in between. Young love—what a sweet madness it is.

"—without whose steadying hand this beloved town of ours, grown now into a proud city, might not have survived the traumas of its youth—"

Come now, Jimmy, enough! Pardee ceased to listen altogether, his eyes bemusedly scanning the crowd gathered in St. Alban's to

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pay their final respects. Miscreants all, he thought wryly, their principal crime—to have aged too fast, and fought the wrong fights and loved the wrong things.

He shook off that mordant strain of mind (this of all days he should be happy), his eyes settling again on Marie Hansen in the front row, her son, daughter-in-law, and two grandchildren alongside her. Progeny. Posterity. Another roll of the genetic dice, a possible future King. He himself felt the absence of his unborn children as he would have felt missing limbs. Without children you aren't really in the game. But he shook off that thought too.

Marie, Marie. His eyes browsed her left, three-quarter profile. A million years ago—in Miss Winship's geography class—he saw precisely this same angle of her from his seat, and he'd doted on it, fed on it; as he was doing again. Old bones rattled in his closet, chains dragged across his attic floor, and the disturbance surprised and puzzled him. She had been pretty then, and sweet-tempered, and he had loved her; but he had been haunted by other and darker things since those easy days.

"—suffered the early loss of father, mother, and then beloved sister, but with unflagging courage—"

If there is actually a recording angel, Pardee thought, having picked out from the flow of Dale's words these few, he (or she) must take joy in the knack that the living have for forgiving the sins of the dead. In omission and commission alike, Hansen had been a wonderfully sinful man, as some in this murmuring crowd were surely aware. And as for the "beloved sister"—Pardee, his mind tentatively once again tasting release and freedom, almost laughed.

And then they were carrying the deceased out, the good and dutiful son at one of the coffin's holds, five older, more tired hands at the others. Pardee had meant to get out ahead of the mob, but now it had him in its clutch in the center aisle, a spongy, undulating vise of flesh. He steeled himself, kept his eye on the distant open doors, and moved with the flow, hearing on his left a gossip's unrestrainable speculation, "They say he never stopped looking for her. They say he believed until the day he died that she was still alive." "Oh, Lord!" came a delightedly affrighted response, "*you don't suppose she's here!*" Pardee, who stood six inches taller than most people in this world, looked down at the source of this whispered colloquy and almost laughed again. He was having some trouble, he noted pleasantly, adjusting.

There was a large brick-paved forecourt to St. Alban's, almost a

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plaza, and the crowd blossomed widely into it from the doors. Pardee moved to the edge of this flower, his back to clear space, and waited, sun and air welcome. The hearse had been drawn up in front, the pallbearers poised behind it, when he felt her eyes on his face, palpable as fingertips.

She was standing alongside the first limousine behind the hearse, and was turned frankly his way. At that distance the bones and big dark eyes of her face were dominant and she had seemed to shuck fifty years. She still stood straight, proud chin still high, a firm figure still behind the bleak mournful clothes. Her grandson was holding open the limousine door, expectantly; and she, Pardee thought, was looking at him with exactly the same air.

It startled him; and for the first time in memory he felt a sharp sense of responsibility for his life. It was the price—he recognized with alarm—of freedom. But the moment passed and the alarm faded. She stepped into her car and Pardee turned and threaded his way through the disintegrating crowd.

Mercer's card was stuck in the frame of the door when Pardee got back home. *E. L. Mercer, Real Estate.* Standing offer of $15,000 an acre for what was left of the farm—ten acres. E. L. came by about once a week to wave the offer in his face. And now, maybe—

But no; he could no more leave this land now than he could have forty-five years ago. He put Mercer's card in the trash bag under the sink. He knew Mercer's phone number, address, face, rubbery lips, greedy little eyes too well to ever forget. Sometimes, in fact, Mercer set Pardee to pondering on the nature of greed, but he would not spin those wheels today; he had other things to think about; like—?

Well, Hansen's delectable corpus, if nothing else. Even though it had been a closed-coffin service this afternoon, Pardee's momentarily x-ray eyes had seen the lanky, leather-tough, murderous old man behind that expensive carapace of bronze; finally, miraculously dead. Pardee had never really hoped to outlive Hansen, any more than he'd hoped to get Hansen off his back. But—there was an irony here he would learn in time to measure—the hard, disciplined life of the farmer to which Hansen had enchained him was, if there is such a thing, your basic ninety-year guarantee. Maybe even a hundred. But hell, what for? And now another irony: with the enemy dead, life seemed less worth living.

Pardee did not like those skeins of thought. He got up and went

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out and fed his chickens. He had picked up from the Holiday Market on his way home a fresh box of discard lettuce leaves for the flock, another habit so entrenched as to be unbreakable, even under the impact of Hansen's last rites.

From where Marie Hansen was sitting at the table in the conference room of the Oak Hills Development Corporation, which she now owned, she could see, across a wide expanse of parking lot and over an eight-foot-high cinder-block wall, Frank Pardee's walnut grove, now in full leaf. She sighed imperceptibly and her eyes glazed over for a moment at the sight and its evocations. The room was quiet, finally. Mel Ellis, her lawyer, had just left, following a train of others. Only her accountant, Harry Crawford, remained in the room. He was across the table from her and had been squaring up papers to a point of fetishistic precision.

Finally he looked up at her and said, "Marie, you look good." He had spoken hesitantly; it was only six days since her husband's funeral.

"I feel good," she said. Her eyes and attention returned slowly to the room. She was wearing a burnt-orange pant-suit, a white V-neck blouse, a silver thing around her throat, a watch, a ring. Crawford had been his usual conservative self; in fact, she looked lovely. "I was at a meeting this morning," she went on, "of the William Hansen Memorial Committee—if you can imagine such a thing."

"He had many friends, Marie."

"And what they wanted to do was build a wing on the hospital in Bill's name—until Bill Junior told them that if the local medical fraternity practiced a little preventive medicine, we wouldn't need half the hospital beds we've already got. *That's* why I feel good, Harry. I've got one hell of a son. He must be the only doctor in California making less than fifty thousand a year."

"Ah—" Crawford was noncommittal. He had half a dozen doctor clients; but aside from that, for *anyone* to make less money than the law allowed was heresy. He changed course. "E. L. Mercer," he said, "reports that Frank Pardee is showing signs of a willingness to sell. I understand that you and Mr. Pardee are—er—old friends."

"From whom do you understand that?"

"Well, Marie—from Bill. The last meeting we had before he—er—ah—"

"Died."

"Yes. He mentioned it."

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"In what context?"

"Thinking, I suppose, that you might, er, help persuade Mr. Pardee—"

"*Bill said that?*"

"Unless I misheard him." Crawford reddened slightly, his eyes dropping.

"You misheard him."

She got up and walked to the window she'd been facing. She had never been in this room before. It had been part of her husband's stern dogma that women do not belong in conference rooms and men do not belong in kitchens. Which had been all right with her. But in this particular conference room, since lunch three hours ago, she'd learned that she was several times a millionaire, even after taxes, and that matters now in the works could easily double that amount. *Widow of a retired police chief!*

"All it takes is money," Harry Crawford had said laconically at one point, "to make money. And you've got the base, Marie. With Pardee's ten acres, properly leveraged, you understand, we could"—and so on.

It had been a varied meeting, a brief tip of the hat to the past, a wide-armed embrace of the future. A young and offensively long-haired architect had unfolded a master plan for the development of Pardee's remaining land—and Marie could not believe her ears. *They would take Frank's last few acres from him?* Bill must have lost his mind before finally that strange dark heart had ceased to beat.

But she had said nothing and the young architect—one of a series of specialists presented to her at the meeting—had folded his sketches and easel and quietly slipped away. Only one thing had become crystal-clear to her—that it's a contest between a man and his money as to who owns whom. Had Bill really owned his? And now, did she? What she yearned for, thinking that, was not her kitchen, but one of those frosty Sierra streams full of savage little trout that her father had introduced her to some sixty years ago when the world was young. She had not fished even once, nor even thought about it, for twenty years and she supposed it was probably too late—you need such good legs. But she rejected that thought at once—she *did* feel good, quick and sure-footed as ever. Just out of place in this room with its unkitchenlike problems. Maybe Bill had been right.

But surely he'd not encouraged his cohorts to pressure Frank into

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selling his last ten acres. Unless—as she had thought earlier—Bill's mind had truly slipped a gear. Or had he lied to her last month, the whole business about his sister just a dying man's fantasy?

"I can remember," she said impulsively, waving a hand, "when all this was a beanfield. I can remember when the Pardee family owned four hundred acres of what was generally known as the richest farmland in the state." She turned and faced her somewhat nonplused accountant. "Mr. Pardee, you know," she went on, "is a college-trained agriculturalist." Staring at the accountant, she wondered if that meant anything to him, or if indeed it ever entered his mind to consider the provenance of the food he ate. Deciding it didn't, she decided his cosmos of values and hers were incompatible. Bill's death had truly shaken her cage, sprung its locks.

Where Pearl's Harbor used to function on Wescott Boulevard was now the Cadillac-Oldsmobile agency, part of what was called Auto Row, a half mile of wall-to-wall cars for sale, new and used. But before World War II, Pearl's Harbor was where the land-locked, dust-coated Frank Pardee put in to bunker up on booze. When required. Which was seldom before his marriage, often after. And then seldom after his wife's ambiguous death.

Pearl was an aging and widening wahine from the island of Maui who'd married a U.S. Navy CPO named Darling and retired with him to the town of Oak Hills in 1934. Darling died a year later and his widow opened Pearl's Harbor. Darling's Harbor, she knew instinctively, wouldn't do.

In 1937 Pardee's mother died of something which, two or three years later, would have been cured in two days with a treatment of sulfanilimide. In 1939 his father died aboard an experimental cultivator combine that tore him to shreds when its gear-box froze—and then, at precisely the wrong moment, unfroze. That tragic event made Frank Pardee the sole owner and occupant of 400 acres of land. At that time the westernmost limits of the small, but even then burgeoning town of Oak Hills bordered the easternmost salient of the Pardee farm for exactly one and three-quarter miles. A volatile frontier, as most of them are.

On July 10th, 1941 Frank Pardee married Tanya Hansen. The bride was given away—her parents being deceased—by her brother, Sergeant William Hansen of the Oak Hills Police Department. The nuptials were celebrated on the lawn in front of the Pardee farmhouse, the reception held in the house itself. It was the last time

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that Frank Pardee and Marie Parmenter—more recently Marie Hansen—looked at or spoke to each other. December 7, 1941, and a whole new era of time was a little less than five months away.

Frank Pardee, seeking to define something to live with, if not for, after Hansen's death, was bar-hopping in strange terrain. He'd not been "on the town" in years and was feeling awkward about it, an unvisaed alien. He missed the honest camaraderie of Pearl's Harbor, the open, up-front intent to drink, to make a date, or now and again to test your mettle in the alley out behind.

He'd lost the art of getting drunk, the catharsis of a good booze-up. And the capacity to hold the stuff. And the rhythm of this place wasn't his either. He looked at his cocktail napkin in the gloom: The Switching Yard, it said, whatever that meant. Music—too loud—coming from some dark source; his own face staring out dimly from the back-bar mirror. At Pearl's the back-bar mirror had been covered with pictures of the Pacific Fleet, well-lit; Pearl herself in a gaudy Mother Hubbard you could see for a quarter mile; chin music the only kind heard, or needed. But that night when Sergeant Bill Hansen had found him there, he'd—

Pardee finished the beer in his hand and quickly ordered another from the ghostly man behind the bar. Yes, he'd been too drunk that night, too bitter, too inside himself to hear any outside sound, or limn any sight. And too confused, and still too sick, too *physically* sick, to stand what he was doing to himself. Yet the scene was all too clear in his mind, even now.

Hansen had slid in beside him, back to the bar, his winter uniform dark as a chunk of the night-time sky. He said very quietly, leaning into Pardee's ear, "Frank, how come did you do it?" And then, before Pardee could speak a word, Hansen had him by the elbow, leading him out.

"Do what?" Pardee finally mumbled in Hansen's ear, and Hansen, out loud this time said, "Kill her."

She was alongside the barn on her back. The beam of Hansen's flashlight played around her head, a mess of hair, dirt, and blood.

"I—" Pardee whispered, feeling his belly churn.

"With the shovel." Hansen's flash pointed it out leaning against the barn wall a few feet away.

"—killed her?"

"With the shovel. Four or five times you hit her, Frank."

Pardee turned aside, fell to his knees, and threw up. God knows,

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he thought in a moment's clarity, I'm not sorry; but then confusion closed in again.

"You should have stayed in the hospital another day or two," Hansen said. "You were still too sick to be turned loose—and then you go and get yourself drunk."

"She was a witch," Pardee said feebly.

"Maybe she was," Hansen said. "But she was my sister too, Frank. I can't just let it go."

"When did I—?"

"An hour, maybe an hour and a half ago. She called me around ten at the station tonight, said you were acting crazy, threatening. She said she'd never seen you like that before."

An hour, maybe an hour and a half ago. It seemed to Pardee he'd been drinking longer than that; but he couldn't remember what had started it. He had seen her at supper, then—Then what?

"But I guess I didn't take her seriously enough," Hansen was saying. "I told her to go hide in the barn until you'd cooled off, but I guess this was as far as she got."

His light played up and down the supine body and Pardee found he could look at it now. A witch, a true witch, the Devil's bride if ever the Devil had one. On their so-called honeymoon she'd even—he shook off that ugly thought for the millionth time. But so damn beautiful it made you cry. No longer, though, no longer, the light full on her broken head.

"Get the shovel," Hansen said.

"Why?"

"You're gonna bury her, Frank. Right there." The light moved and drew an X on the ground closer to the barn.

"You said I killed her."

"You did kill her, but what good would it do to throw you in jail?"

Pardee had sobered fast and was thinking clearly for the first time since he'd taken ill days ago. "But she'll be—they'll miss her."

"I'll take care of that. Start digging."

"How'll you take care of it?"

"I took her call at the station tonight. I didn't log it, so there's no record. Tomorrow you'll report her missing—to me. I'll investigate, trace her to, say, San Francisco. We'll put out a missing persons bulletin on her and every once in a while we'll get a report—*I* will. A year, two, maybe five from now, it'll all be forgotten."

"Why?" Pardee said, clear-minded now, but still weak-kneed.

"Because you're my brother-in-law, Frank."

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The tone of voice had been cold, almost mocking. There'd been no love lost between them, a minimal courtesy at best. When Pardee had come home from college for the last time, degree in hand, his girl had been lost to this man. His boyhood sweetheart, the one you *never* forget, the one who knew your hopes at their noblest height. Marie.

"There's more to it than that," Pardee said.

"Start digging, Frank." Hansen got the shovel from the barn wall and pushed it into Pardee's hands. "It's after one o'clock, let's get on with it." They were face to face for a moment, inches apart, Hansen's star-lit visage under his visored cap, the male analogue of his sister's; a startlingly handsome man. When Pardee had first seen him he'd understood Marie's defection; just as, when he had first seen Tanya, his own destiny became fixed.

But that magical bloom had long since worn off both the Hansens, and Pardee said once again, "There's more to it than that, Bill. What?"

"You're right, Frank." Hansen's eyes glittered in the night. "I wanna get rich. Start digging."

The glass of beer put in Pardee's hand by the bartender of The Switching Yard was cold and he clutched it as he had the handle of that shovel years ago, fiercely. A dollar, he reflected with the here-and-now part of his mind, for an eight-ounce glass of the stuff. At Pearl's you used to get ten ounces for a dime.

He didn't see the woman who'd moved in on his left until she touched his arm and said, "My name's Ella. What's yours?"

He stared at her blankly for a moment. She was pretty in the dim, flattering light, and old enough to be his sister, if he'd had one; but no woman of any age had ever approached him this way. "My name's Frank," he said.

"You're a very handsome man," she said. A hand came up and pressed gently against his cheek. "You look the way senators should look."

"I'm a farmer," he said, and began to understand the name and purpose of the place. A body exchange, in the current vernacular. He felt oddly pleased, and gestured Ella to take the seat next to his. Their common ground, he saw, was loneliness. At the very least he would buy her a drink.

The second meeting of the William Hansen Memorial Fund Committee was on the brink of collapse. Mrs. Charles O'Rourke, the

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chairperson, was digging in for a final stand, and said firmly to Mrs. Hansen, "We must have—at the minimum—a memorial alcove in the new police building, something to—"

"A sort of chapel?" Mrs. Hansen suggested sweetly. "Or did you have in mind more of a shrine?"

"Well, perhaps that's the wrong connota—"

"I will approve of a niche in the main hallway of the building. Or better yet, just a plaque on the wall with Bill's head in profile. I'll pay for it, even."

"An alcove with at least a life-scale bust, a pictorial history of his career, his uniform in a glass case, his weapons—"

"He carried but one weapon in all his life, Mrs. O'Rourke, a Smith & Wesson .38 revolver."

"Well then, *that!*"

"Hardly enough for an alcove. I approve only of a plaque."

"But he did so *much* for this town, Mrs. Hansen. We have been named All-American City three times largely because of our superb record on law and order."

Mrs. Hansen had risen and walked to the door of the meeting room. She had warned earlier that her time today was limited. "A plaque," she said firmly. "At the most. Let's not make his act too hard to follow."

"*Well*—I never!" Mrs. O'Rourke was shocked.

It was 11:30 in the morning, the tenth day after her husband's funeral, and Mrs. Hansen had to catch a plane at 12:40, a connector flight from Oak Hills to San Francisco; and thence to Rapid City, South Dakota. Walking briskly to her car she pondered on the effect that her husband's dark good looks had had on women, right up until the end. There were no men on Mrs. O'Rourke's committee.

She stayed that night at the Deadwood Motel on West Chicago Street in Rapid City, but was on her way to the town of Big Tree the next morning at 8:30, driving a rented Ford. It was 127 miles away, according to the map, through country that was called, if she remembered correctly, "Big Sky" country; and there was indeed something about it. The land seemed magically higher in the air to her than other land, though nearly flat, and the sky overhead more domed than her sky, more distant in the middle, yet closer at the sides. More personal, she thought. She could see Bill in it, and Tanya. And she saw quite clearly that this was their natal place; they could not have been born anywhere else.

Big Tree was a town of 1500 souls, according to the sign at the

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city limits, and situated just west of the Cheyenne Indian Reservation on U.S. 212. It was also the county seat, Mrs. Hansen was pleased to see, and she parked in front of the old red-brick County Courthouse at the intersection of Route 212 and Main Street. It was 11:15.

An hour later she was having lunch at a café across the street from the Courthouse, and in her purse were photocopies of the death certificates of Bill and Tanya's parents. There was a flight out of Rapid City she could catch at 4:45, so she finished her lunch expeditiously in order to budget time to visit the Big Tree cemetery, a promise she'd made to herself. They were, after all, her son's grandparents, links in the chain.

Guided by instructions received earlier from a Courthouse clerk, she found it at the north edge of town, a grassless, stony, only partially fenced field of the dead. There was no caretaker, no building, no sign of life; but the Hansen plot was easily found, a red-granite obelisk marking the site and a headstone for each of the two graves. They looked new and shiny; Bill had told her last month that he'd ordered them just a year ago. It was the only time he'd ever spoken of his parents, except to say they were dead. It was also the only time he'd ever spoken of his birthplace—and the quarter of his blood that was Cheyenne.

Charles W. Hansen and Leota T. Hansen. Born ten years apart, but died on the same day in April of 1934. The eleventh. The casual, uninstructed visitor might fancy that they'd been victims of the same car accident, or—in those days—train wreck. But Marie knew better; and now—for the first time, really—she believed all of Bill's story, told her after that first and nearly fatal infarction last month.

She was in Rapid City in plenty of time to catch the 4:45 flight home.

It was after midnight when her plane put down at the Oak Hills Municipal Airport. She was tensely awake as they approached, and awed at the scattered spread of the town, as defined in its network of lights. Had she herself grown as much, she wondered sharply, or merely aged? Troubling thoughts had plagued her all day. She was a rich woman, and there was a growing, sneaky comfort in that fact. It is written that you cannot be too thin or too rich. But what is "rich"? Thin she understood, but rich she didn't. Not yet.

Driving out of the airport parking lot, in the privacy of the night, she decided to tour her holdings. It would be easy; they were con-

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centrated and nearby; they comprised the 390 acres of what used to be the Pardee farm. Just south of the airport was the 200-acre industrial park that Bill had acquired and developed shortly after the war, just in time for the boom. And south of that a series of subsequent acquisitions, spaced through the years, and put to various uses from residential through commercial.

But with 30 acres of it mockingly set aside as Pardee Park, a name that must, she thought, driving slowly by its tree-heavy silhouette, grate on Frank's nerves. She was glad, though, that Bill had lacked the hubris to name it after himself. God knows he'd been guilty of enough else, as she had learned—shadowy pressure on the planning commission, the subtle kind of blackmail that only a chief of police can exert. Plus murder. It had all started with murder—she understood that now: the murder of his parents.

She turned east on Wescott Boulevard, the Mercedes nearly silent as it tooled along the wide empty street. She loved this car—her car, a gift from Bill after he retired as chief a year ago. "We can spread our wings now," he said. "No more living under wraps." And then they'd bought the big house on Oak Hills Ridge that she still wasn't used to. But she could be, she was coming to think. It was a house to be proud of—if your taste ran that way. And why should it not? What was money for, anyway? Whatever its source.

She stopped for a moment across the street from Frank Pardee's house, and a flood of memories ran athwart her mind. Her youth had been precious to her, a time of clear values and simple needs. Bill's advent into her life had plunged her suddenly into the deeper, darker waters of the real world. Before Bill there had been only Frank; and their love had been pure as newly fallen snow. Tears now flooded her eyes and she resolved that tomorrow, for sure, she'd call on him. She'd been planning to ever since she'd seen him at St. Alban's; but now it was imperative—for her sake as well as his. She felt a crisis coming on.

He saw the Mercedes turn into his drive and thought, no, that can't be a cab; and when he recognized the driver a moment later he became acutely conscious of his clothes—blue jeans, a sweat-stained work shirt, a tractor-driver's billed cap. She parked the car as close as she could to where he was—in the kitchen garden—and got out. She was wearing the burnt-orange pant-suit again and had washed and set her hair that morning, fluffing it around her head in an iron-gray cloud. She had taken special pains with herself.

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Pardee put down his hoe—he'd been chopping weeds—and went through the garden gate to meet her, cap removed. There was between them before he spoke an arc of tension almost visible, like summer lightning.

He said without thinking about it, "I always liked you in orange. It surely hasn't been fifty years."

"Almost," she said, and put out her hand, which he took. The arc between them lost force suddenly; it had been mostly memory—for him anyway. She sought for something to say and found it. "When did you put in the walnuts? I remember mostly open fields here."

"Twelve years ago. They're easier to care for than field crops—beans, corn, sugar-beets."

"Frank—?"

"Yes."

"How—has it been for you? You look so good."

"So do you, Marie."

"Then—have we both—prospered?"

"You have. That car—" He gestured.

She blurted, "Did he pay you *anything* for the land? I can't tell from the records."

"Not much, but enough. I've kept afloat. Marie, it's all right." In the last few days he'd ceased missing Hansen as an enemy. In the last few days his life had turned around again.

She was having trouble. As a boy he'd been apple-cheeked good-looking; as a man he was handsome as a god, still slender and ramrod straight. Once again memory gripped her mind, the old values intact and untarnished, the old ideals clearly defined. It was enough to make you cry. "Remember," she said suddenly, "our birthdays—yours on the fifteenth of June, mine on the fifteenth of July?"

"Yes. We were going to celebrate them both on the thirtieth of June."

"We were always going to meet each other halfway, weren't we, Frank."

He smiled to lighten the moment; something violent and ugly had wrenched across her face. He read it as guilt and regret, burdens he'd long since dropped. "I remember the pleasant things," he said. "The rest—" He shrugged, dismissing them.

It helped her. A brief sigh helped further. Her eyes flicked from his, surveyed the pastoral scene behind him, then roved to the homely two-story frame house, fresh painted and still sound as a fort. It looked as good as he did, durable in a unique, primal way.

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She sighed again and half turned to look at the barn. Then she said, "Frank, are you going to sell?"

"Is that why you're here, Marie?"

"No. But are you?"

"Do you want me to? Bill—"

"Bill what?"

"Bill knew that I wouldn't. Couldn't."

"But still he sent Mercer around, didn't he?"

"Mercer has called. But I've always told him no."

"Because you had no choice—I understand that. But you have a choice now. Frank, you can sell it if you want to."

She'd regained all her composure, but he'd lost the edge of his. They were approaching the heart of the matter, dangerous ground. As she had done, he glanced at the barn, magnetized. They would bulldoze it into rubble, pile it up, and burn it. Then they'd grade the land for whatever jerry-built scheme they had in mind and her bones would churn up into the light of day. She was covered with no more than a couple of feet of topsoil—it had been a hurried job that night. So he still couldn't sell. But now he didn't want to—for other reasons.

"Show me," she said, watching his eyes.

"Show you what?"

"Where she's buried."

So—he thought, and waited for a sweep of fear to follow; but none came. Her eyes bore him no threat. "Bill told you," he said softly.

"A month ago."

"He said he wouldn't. He said he'd never tell anyone."

"He kept his word, Frank. I'm the only one who knows."

"That's not keeping his word," Pardee said. Anger now charged him, not fear. Was it to go on forever, a Hansen around his neck like an albatross? She saw the rage in his eyes and raised a peace-keeping hand.

"Frank, you need not fear," she said. "There's nothing to be afraid of any more. I know you didn't do it."

"That means nothing! I know I didn't do it, too." He'd known almost from the first that he didn't do it, that he didn't have it in him to kill even Tanya; but no, he'd not known it *for sure* until now, until a Hansen put it into words. A slow sweet relief rose in him and he almost thanked her, almost reached to take her in his arms.

But then the counterflow: it would make no difference because he couldn't prove his innocence. After nearly a half century of palpable

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guilt, no jury in the world would—he'd been over that ground before.

She'd watched him carefully, had seen his arms start their reach for her, and had felt her own responding surge. It was still possible, she thought, to go back, to recapture, to meet halfway— "Bill did it," she said. "He told me the whole story."

"Well, I always knew," Pardee said evenly, "that if I didn't, he did. But I never understood why."

"He told me that too. It's because she had killed their parents."

He considered that, frowning; then rejected it. "But that was years before. Why did he wait until—?"

"Because he wasn't sure until you became ill. You remember how ill you were?"

He remembered. "The only time in my life I've been in the hospital."

"Bill checked with your doctor. I don't think even you knew at the time, but you had botulism. From tomatoes canned and served by Tanya." He was still frowning, and she reached out and touched his arm."It's the same way she killed her parents, Frank, and when she tried it on you, Bill knew for sure. He'd suspected it before, but didn't want to believe it."

"My God!" Pardee said. "What a woman. She told me on our honeymoon that she was going to kill me. She didn't say, 'I love you'; she said, 'I'm going to kill you'." He shook his head. "And that night I was down the street getting drunk."

"He knew you were, dear. He picked his time." She touched his arm again and he didn't withdraw. He seemed bemused. "He knew you'd been drinking for hours that night, and he knew why. He knew you hated and feared her."

"You cannot imagine what she was like."

"And he knew she'd told you she was going to kill you."

"How did he know that?"

"She told him. She married you to get control of your property. Bill knew that—and approved. They shared a fierce ambition. But he couldn't forgive her killing their parents. He loved them."

"My God, what a *pair!*" Pardee's mind, loosened by the shock of revelation, seemed to drift for a moment. He was almost smiling when he said, "At St. Alban's I heard two women speak of Tanya—and Bill. They said he'd never ceased trying to find her, that he always believed she was alive, that she'd come back. He did a remarkable job, didn't he?"

"He worked at it, darling. For years I myself believed she'd be

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found. He kept getting these reports—or so he said—that she'd been seen here, or there, all around the country. He must have made a dozen trips to look for her. He made it part of his life—and part of his legend. He almost came to believe it himself, Frank."

"Why did he confess all this to you, Marie?"

"Ah—" She had wondered that herself, but now thought she knew. "Mostly," she said, "because he liked you, Frank dear. He wanted to free you, I think. And partly, I suppose, out of fear for his soul. He'd almost died from that first attack."

"He wanted to 'free' me?" Pardee let the words echo. "But he must have known that wouldn't be enough. A dying man's confession, once removed, won't do it, Marie."

"But we don't need his confession, darling!" She gripped his arm. "We have something better than that."

"We—?" He pulled back from her hand. "What do you mean 'we'?"

"Darling—"

A taxi was grinding up the gravel lane from the street and they turned together to watch it, Pardee's face blooming quickly with pleasure. The taxi ground to a stop and Pardee loped forward to open the door, and a plump, cheerfully smiling blonde woman emerged, her arms laden with packages. Pardee, seemingly oblivious of Marie, relieved the woman of half her load, but was still too shy to bend forward as he wanted to do and kiss her.

The woman turned her pleasant welcoming gaze on Marie, and Pardee, a little embarrassed, did the amenities. "Darling," he said, "I'd like you to meet Mrs. Marie Hansen. Marie, this is my wife, Ella." Then he felt he owed her a somewhat enlarged explanation. "Two days ago we were married in Nevada. Ella's been downtown shopping."

There was no going back—Marie had finally reconciled herself to that hard fact. You are what you make yourself and she had been nearly fifty years making herself Bill Hansen's wife, and now his widow.

Last night she'd had dinner with Frank and Ella Pardee and spent the evening with them, at first aggrieved and defensive, and then disarmed by the genuine charm of Frank's new wife. Now Frank was all he could be to her, a once and possibly future friend; but that was enough. She had her other comforts.

This morning the William Hansen Memorial Fund Committee had held its third and probably final meeting. Mrs. O'Rourke, girded

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for a losing fight, was surprised, not to say stunned, by her adversary's quick and total capitulation. The memorial alcove in the new police building was approved without debate, the late chief's widow to foot the considerable bill. Her one stipulation had been that the chief's gun, firmly secured behind a bullet-proof, brass-bound glass case, be the central item of memorabilia. The committee could select the rest.

And that night she wrote a long letter to her son—*To be opened only after my death.* In it she told him the story of his father and the aunt he'd never known, the final lines reading, "Frank Pardee believed Tanya was killed by blows to the head with a shovel. She was not. The blows were delivered by your father *after* he had shot her through the heart. The battered condition of her head was intended to deceive Mr. Pardee, and it did. For nearly fifty years.

"Charles, when and if within your lifetime Mr. Pardee is charged with this crime, I want you to turn this letter (confession!) over to the district attorney. A ballistics comparison of a bullet fired from your father's gun with the one that will be found ultimately among your murdered aunt's bones, will be all the further proof needed. Your father's gun will be easily and permanently available in the new police building."

She leaned back from her desk, tired. It had been a long detailed recitation, much of it wrenched from her heart. *To be opened*, she thought, quoting herself, *only after my death*—why such melodramatics? That part of the letter was not like her; she was more open and direct, as was her son. He wouldn't approve either.

She reread the story, prepared and stamped an envelope for it, walked four blocks through the night to the nearest mailbox, and dropped it in. It was as though she'd rid herself of a long-festering sore.

The next afternoon the letter was delivered to Mr. Frank Pardee, City.

"Q"

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a crime story by

JULIAN SYMONS

Julian Symons maintains that during the current period in the continuing evolution of our genre the crime story is in the ascendancy. He is too modest to point to his own work as proof of his contention, but he could do so most persuasively. Here is a superior example of the English crime short story which Julian Symons writes so well that you will think you are reading the facts and details of a real-life case . . .

THE DUPE

by JULIAN SYMONS

There was a good deal of argument about the justice of the verdict when Evelyn Ellis was found guilty but insane. It is not likely, anyway, that she would have been hanged; but, curiously enough, it was the particular person Evelyn chose to kill, and the first words she spoke to the police afterward, that influenced the jury most strongly in reaching their verdict. And so Evelyn Ellis spent the last fifteen years of her life in Broadmoor, where she sang old-fashioned sentimental songs and developed considerable skill in loom weaving, turning out a quite remarkable variety of scarves and table runners. It is very likely that, with the exception of the few days to be described in this story, those were the happiest years of her life.

In the forty-five years before she went to Broadmoor, Evelyn Ellis had had little cause for singing. Her father died when she was six years old; he had been a partner in a shipping agency, and left to his widow a share in this business which was sufficient to keep her and the children in reasonable comfort. It did so for a few years until Ellis' partner, who had been carrying on the agency single-

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handed, went abroad in a hurry. He had always been perfectly charming to Mrs. Ellis, and the revelation that he had been diverting large sums of money from the agency to his private use profoundly shocked her. She was at first too dazed to appreciate fully the change in her circumstances from prosperity to sharp poverty; when she finally understood that life held for her no prospect but that of finding some kind of job to keep herself and her two daughters, Mrs. Ellis took an overdose of veronal. She left a letter to her sister Lavinia, with whom she had quarreled bitterly several years before, begging her to provide for the education of Evelyn and Agnes.

Aunt Lavinia did her best for the children after her fashion, which was that of the hard-headed wife of a hard-headed wholesaler in cotton goods. She paid for their education at a shabby-genteel private school, where they learned very little and were rather poorly fed. They stayed at school during most holidays; for Aunt Lavinia, who had intensely disliked her woolly-minded sister, had no particular desire to see her sister's children. It was at school, during holiday time, that the incident occurred which marked Evelyn's whole life.

She was fourteen years old and her sister was twelve when Evelyn playfully pushed Agnes, as they stood at the head of the stairs leading to the school library. Agnes slipped, fell down the dozen stairs to the bottom, and lay there laughing at her sister and saying that she could not get up. Agnes had, in fact, fractured her spine.

She lay on her back for many months, seen, probed at, and discussed by a variety of doctors who were, as Aunt Lavinia told the sisters more than once, a great expense. The months developed into years, and gradually it was understood and accepted by everybody, including Agnes herself, that she would never walk normally again. She was not completely helpless, for with the aid of sticks she was able to walk a few steps to a chair where she half sat, half lay, but anything like a normal life was impossible for her.

Perhaps it seems strange that the effect of the accident was to bind the sisters more closely together. Agnes apparently felt no resentment for the push that had turned her from a healthy, laughing girl into a cripple. Evelyn, on the other hand, felt a burden of guilt about her sister that could never be removed. Her life was dedicated to making Agnes happy. When she took a secretarial job in London, Agnes came with her to share the tiny flat in suburban Balham which was all she could afford. Before leaving for work every day Evelyn made her own and Agnes' breakfast, and helped

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her sister to dress. During the daytime Agnes sat in a chair by their first-floor window and watched what went on in the street.

She became a well-known figure in the neighborhood as she waved gaily and called a greeting to children, tradesmen, and neighbors. The landlady, Mrs. Norton, who cooked midday dinner every day and brought it up to Agnes, was full of admiration for her cheerfulness. "Your sister is wonderful, Miss Evelyn," she used to say. "Always merry and bright." And indeed Agnes was always smiling and had a beautiful fresh complexion, in contrast to Evelyn whose face was sallow, and who wore a perpetually harassed look.

When Evelyn was twenty-eight she met an elderly man named Edward Ryan, who worked in the accounts department of the insurance company in which Evelyn was a secretary. Ryan took her out half a dozen times, to theaters and dances, and twice to dinner. On these evenings, of course, Agnes was left alone, although Mrs. Norton came up to have a chat with her. Agnes asked her sister quietly whether she had had a nice time, but her high color was a little higher and her bright eyes a little brighter than usual when Evelyn returned home.

On the second occasion when Edward Ryan took Evelyn to dinner, one of the fears about her sister that haunted Evelyn became a reality. In walking, with the aid of sticks, from bed to chair, Agnes had slipped and fallen. She had been badly shaken, although she had managed to get back to bed. All this Agnes told Evelyn, her bright eyes fixed with unwavering intensity on her sister's face. Afterward Evelyn whispered a guilty "Yes" to her sister's questions about having a nice time. The next day she told Edward Ryan that she could not go out with him any more, and shortly afterward she found another job.

In those days Evelyn still had a kind of anxious prettiness of which nothing remained in the gaunt, sallow woman who seventeen years later stood in the dock on a charge of murder. At the time of her trial Evelyn was employed as assistant in Mr. Pettigrew's antiquarian bookshop just off Piccadilly. Mr. Pettigrew was a second cousin of Aunt Lavinia, who had positively cast off the sisters when Evelyn refused to consider the idea that Agnes would be better off in a nursing home. Mr. Pettigrew said that he gave Evelyn a job because he was sorry for her, but he may have kept her on because she typed his letters and kept his books for a smaller salary than he would have had to pay anybody else.

Evelyn had no specialized knowledge of books, but that was not

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very important, for she was only left in charge of the shop between four and six o'clock. Just before four o'clock each day, after drinking his cup of afternoon tea, plump, neat little Mr. Pettigrew went home. He always made the same joke when he left. "Remember you are the guardian of my treasures, Miss Ellis," he said. "If anybody tries to take them from you, just show them Jessie." Jessie was the old revolver, a relic of Mr. Pettigrew's service in the First World War, tucked away in a drawer at the back of the shop. But not many customers came in between four and six o'clock, and although a few of them were rather odd, there was never any need to show them Jessie.

For that matter, although Mr. Pettigrew had some handsome sets of standard authors in finely tooled bindings, his bookshop did not contain such wonderful treasures as all that—not like the jeweler's next door, with its half-dozen clasps, necklaces, and single stones discreetly displayed on velvet behind steel-barred windows. Evelyn always lingered to look at the jeweler's window after shutting the shop and saying good night to Williams, the night watchman of the bank on the other side of Pettigrew's, who also included the jeweler's and the bookshop in his nightly round.

Williams came on duty a few minutes before Evelyn left at night, and he used often to watch her looking into the jeweler's window. At such times her lips moved, although no sound could be heard—an odd and uncomfortable habit which had been noticed by Mr. Pettigrew. The little bookseller had also observed that Evelyn had begun to read voraciously the kind of love stories that are generally bought by teenage shop girls. She also appeared at the bookshop one day with some clumsily applied lipstick on her mouth.

Middle-aged spinsters do tend, however, to odd ideas and habits, as plump Mr. Pettigrew commented to his wife, and there was nothing wrong with Evelyn's work. Probably she would have gone on working for Mr. Pettigrew and looking after Agnes until the end of her life, if it had not been for Millie Hanslet, who took a room on the ground floor of the house in Balham. Millie Hanslet was a brass-haired, loud-voiced fiftyish woman who said that she lived on a small annuity and a widow's pension for her husband, who had been killed in Africa during the war. Millie came up sometimes in the evening to have a cup of tea with the Ellises, and to bemoan quite frankly the absence of men in her life.

"A woman needs a man," she said. "I mean someone to go about with, take her to the pictures, buy ice cream. Isn't that so?"

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"I don't know," said Agnes coldly, from her chair by the window.

Millie Hanslet gave a great wink at Evelyn, who smiled back at her uncertainly. "And *I'm* going to get a man," she added. "You see."

When Millie had gone downstairs Agnes said, "She's vulgar."

"Yes, I suppose so," Evelyn sighed. Then she began to get supper.

Four days later Millie Hanslet came upstairs and produced triumphantly a small snap of a flashily handsome young man with a mustache, and trilby hat worn on one side. "That's my beau."

Agnes hardly looked at it. Evelyn said excitedly, "How did you meet him?"

"Pen Friends Unlimited," Millie said triumphantly. Evelyn merely looked mystified. Millie explained, "It's only five shillings to join and then they give you names of half a dozen gentlemen and give them *your* name and you write to each other and exchange photographs and if you want to meet each other you do. Here's the leaflet."

Evelyn took it automatically. Her eyes were still on the photograph in Millie's hands.

Later that evening Agnes said, "My back hurts. I think I'll go to bed now." Evelyn helped her sister into bed. Agnes' face, round and almost youthful by the side of Evelyn's, was anxious. "You're not going to write to those pen-friend people, are you?"

"Of course not," Evelyn said, and hoped that she sounded convincing. She wrote next day, using the address of Pettigrew's Bookshop. There was no danger of Mr. Pettigrew seeing the reply because Evelyn was always there first to open the post. When writing, Evelyn took eight years off her age, calling herself thirty-seven. She described herself as fair-haired and vivacious, said that she was fond of good books, good music, and the theater, and wanted to correspond with a gentleman under forty who had similar interests.

She received a reply by return post, which she opened with trembling fingers. It was a short letter which thanked her for her postal order, and said that her name had been put on the register of Pen Friends Unlimited. She would realize that most gentlemen under forty were interested in meeting ladies younger than themselves, but her name had been passed to two or three possible pen friends who might be interested.

Two days later the letter came. It began "Dear Pen Friend Evelyn" and was signed "Yours very sincerely, Colin (Jameson)." The writer of the letter said that he was thirty-three years old and liked the older and more sensible type of woman. "These modern flappers with their painted faces and painted toenails drive me to distrac-

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tion," the letter said. "I don't want the woman of my choice to be a frump, but I do want her to have some ideas beyond paint and powder." He enclosed a photograph which showed a rather ruggedly determined-looking man with thick eyebrows and dark hair growing low over his forehead. He did not look much more than thirty years old.

Evelyn read the letter a dozen times. She had a number of photographs taken in her only recent frock, and selected one which, if looked at with a friendly eye, made her look no more than forty. She was hardly prepared, however, for the enthusiasm with which he received it. "I loved your innocent look," he wrote in the firm upright hand she looked for now every day in the post. "And the beautiful spirit that shows in the features. But you must have deceived me about your age. I believe you are younger than I am."

The correspondence flourished. Colin ("You must call me Colin and I shall call you Evelyn," he wrote in his second letter) worked as foreman in a large engineering works in North London, on night shift from seven o'clock in the evening until three a.m. He had been left an orphan at the age of eleven—rather like herself, Evelyn thought—and had then been brought up by a foster-mother. He had worked since he was fourteen. "I have to admit that I'm not really an educated man," he wrote, and she loved his frankness. He had married when he was twenty-two, but after three years of unhappy bickering had discovered his wife's unfaithfulness, and divorced her. "It was foolish of me, dear Evelyn, but this experience turned me against all women for a time. Can you understand that? I think you can, for I believe you have a great knowledge of human nature." He told her that her letters meant a great deal in the life of a lonely man.

The effect of this correspondence on Evelyn was remarkable. A spirit and gaiety came back into her face that had not been there for years. At the bookshop Mr. Pettigrew commented on her cheerfulness, and at home Agnes looked at her with an inquiring eye, although she said nothing. When, however, Millie Hanslet asked if Evelyn had written to Pen Friends Unlimited she received a curt negative answer.

Evelyn Ellis was bemused by the correspondence, but there remained one small shadow of doubt in the fiery dreams of happiness that occupied her every day. It seemed that with Colin working on night shift all the time, they would never meet, and sometimes she feared that he must be unreal, or that some old, old man was playing

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a cruel joke on her. When Colin wrote that he longed for a meeting, she still felt some doubt of him, for he added that on Saturday and Sunday he always went down to see his foster-mother who was bedridden and lived at an Old Peoples' Home near Dorking. "The old lady hasn't much longer in this world," he wrote, "and you wouldn't want me to neglect her."

Evelyn was not suspicious, but she couldn't help feeling that there was something odd about the fact that they could never meet, and when he daringly suggested that he should come to the bookshop one day after Mr. Pettigrew had gone home, she half expected to get a letter the next morning with an elaborate excuse for his absence.

But he came. The door opened and he stood there, dark, square, and robust, his eyes looking quickly round the shop and then settling on her, his mouth smiling. Nobody else was in the shop. She ran forward to him.

"You've come."

"Did you think I wouldn't?" His voice was deep, and in anyone else it might have appeared to her rather common. "I'd have known you anywhere," he said, and added quickly, "We can't talk here. What about coming out to tea?"

She fairly gaped at him. "But I've told you—you know I can't—"

"Why not? What the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve over, as they say. You told me yourself not many people come in after four."

She hesitated, but only for a moment. Relief at finding that he really existed, that fate had not played a cruel trick on her, swamped all other feelings. They went to a little teashop that he knew and Evelyn talked as she had not talked for years. She told him about her childhood and the family misfortunes, and for the first time mentioned her sister vaguely, without saying that she was an invalid.

Colin did not say very much, but he was a good listener and occasionally he squeezed her hand. All too soon he looked at his watch and said that he must go to work. He held her hands at parting. "You'll be here tomorrow."

"I can't," she said weakly. "I oughtn't to shut the shop."

He dropped her hands. "I thought you were sincere about wanting to see me, but perhaps you just don't care."

"Oh, I do, I do."

"Well then, if you want to see me like I want to see you—"

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"All right," Evelyn said. She felt faint with joy at his eagerness, she would have agreed to anything. "I'll be here."

His face lit up, he smiled charmingly. "That's my girl. Just after four tomorrow." In the public street he kissed her goodbye.

That night Agnes guessed the truth that Evelyn, in her happiness, hardly attempted to hide. "You've met a man." Evelyn, humming a tune under her breath, said nothing. "Is it through that beastly Pen Club?"

"And if it is?"

"Then he's up to no good. There's something he wants from you."

Evelyn laughed and turned round. "Do you think he's after me for my money or my looks?" she asked, but there was no bitterness in her voice. Then the flood of her happiness spilled over. "Oh, Agnes, he's so handsome, so attractive. Not quite—not quite our sort, you know, but what does that matter?"

Agnes stared incredulously at the photograph so proudly displayed by her sister. "He must be years younger than you are. In some way or other he's fooling you, he's duping you."

"What way?"

Agnes shook her head. "I don't know, but there's something. You're a dupe, Evie, a dupe. In some way he's using you for a purpose of his own."

"Agnes! It's just that he likes me. He needn't have met me unless he'd wanted to. He's very lonely, he wants company—"

"Does he want it enough to put up with the two of us?" Agnes' voice was high. "Have you told him about me? Or are you just going to leave me to—look after myself?"

The light in Evelyn's face faded. "You know I should never do that."

"And does *he* know it? Have you told him that you've got a crippled sister dependent on you?" Agnes' smooth face was almost ugly as she said, "You'd see that would soon make him change his tune about marriage."

"For heaven's sake, Agnes, there's no question of marriage. Why, I only met him today for the first time."

"You just tell him about your sister, that's all."

Evelyn and Colin met the next day, and the next, but they did not speak of Agnes. The hands of the watch crawled round each day until they reached four o'clock, Mr. Pettigrew made his little joke about his treasures and Jessie, and within five minutes of his departure she was running—yes, positively running—to the teashop

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where they met, without sparing so much as a glance for the jeweler's next door.

Colin was always there, waiting for her—one day when she was five minutes late he looked quite anxious—and he always made some comment on her appearance, and told her how much her friendship meant to him. They talked, or she talked and he listened, and at a quarter-past six each day he left her to go off to work. He was not a gentleman, there could be no doubt of that, but then he made no pretense to be one, and that she felt counted in his favor. On Wednesday she said to him, "I have my half day off tomorrow."

He looked quite startled. "Do you?"

She said shyly, "I could meet you early—at one o'clock—if you'd like to."

"Well, I don't know. I never knew you had a half day off on Thursday." He said this almost in a tone of annoyance. There was a pause. Then came the sudden smile that charmed her, and he said, "We'll go to Richmond. What about that?"

And at Richmond on the river next day Colin told her again that he was a lonely man and asked if she would consider marriage.

"Oh, Colin." They kissed. Then she remembered. She must tell him about Agnes. It would be a kind of a test, she told herself with a sinking heart, it would show whether his feeling for her was sincere. "I've got something to tell you. I want you to look away while I'm saying it."

He took her hands. Beneath the thick brows his eyes were wary. "Here here, what's all this about?"

"Look away from me." He looked into the water, trailing one hand in it, while she told him the story of her sister, confessed the guilt she had always felt, told him of the terrible dream she had had night after night for years in which Agnes, calm and smiling, floated rather than fell down an endless flight of steps with her dress ballooning out like a parachute, and then lay crumpled like a spider at the bottom.

All the while he listened with his face turned away as she had asked, his hand trailing in the water. At the end she said, "So you see I could never leave her," and knew it was a lie, knew that if he asked her to do it she would leave Agnes and go with him.

But he did not ask her. He took his hand out of the water and smiled at her. "Is that all? I thought you had something terrible to tell me."

"You mean it's all right? Agnes can come and live with us?"

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"Of course. You don't suppose I'd turn your sister away."

"Oh, Colin." Words were inadequate to express what she felt. It was as though she were living within a beautiful rose-colored bubble where everything that she wished for came true. She told Agnes, who was pleased but still suspicious. "You must bring him round to see me," she said, and Evelyn promised exultantly that she would. She went downstairs to share her happiness with Millie Hanslet, but Millie Hanslet, Mrs. Norton said, had been called away suddenly to her sick mother at Birmingham and had taken all her possessions with her.

That was Thursday. On Friday and Saturday she saw him again, and on the following Monday the inevitable happened. A customer who had come round at five o'clock on Saturday and found the shop closed had telephoned to Mr. Pettigrew about it. Evelyn made stumbling, confused excuses about her sister, and Mr. Pettigrew said sharply that this must not happen again, or else. Or else what, he did not say, but Evelyn could imagine.

That day she did not go to meet Colin, and at half-past four he came to the shop. A customer was there and Colin glowered at the books until the man had gone. Then he turned on her, and she felt the blast of his anger, withering her precious happiness. She appealed to him. What would happen if she lost her job? He snarled at her then—really there was no other word for it—that he had already promised to look after her and her precious sister. What more did she want?

Then his tone changed suddenly and he talked to her gently, earnestly, persuasively. There was no other time at which they could meet, he said. Didn't she want to see him, as much as he wanted to see her? His dark head was very close to hers, his lips whispered the reassuring words she had always wanted to hear.

Evelyn met him on Tuesday, and again on Wednesday, when she took him home to meet Agnes. Evelyn had made scones and a jam sponge in advance, and she was a little distressed because Colin did not eat very much. She and Agnes made most of the conversation. Colin was pleasant enough, but he seemed to find the occasion a strain.

"Did you like Agnes?" she asked when she was seeing him to the bus.

"Eh? Yes, she's all right. Bad luck for her, being an invalid like that."

"You won't mind living with her?"

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"No," he said as if with an effort. "No, I shan't mind."

"Tomorrow's my half day."

Again he seemed to be making an effort. "So it is. What would you like to do, eh?"

"You'll think I'm foolish, but—I've never seen the Tower of London."

"Tower of London?" He stared at her incredulously. "I thought only kids went there."

Something in his manner upset her, and she almost gabbled. "Oh, we won't go if you don't want to, of course, we'll do anything you like, perhaps it's foolish, it was just that I hadn't seen it—"

"Here, here." He stopped her with a laugh. "Of course we can go there if you want to. I was just a bit surprised, that's all."

Evelyn was almost in tears. "But you said only kids—"

"Now then," he said. "Don't pick me up on everything I say. You're beginning to think you're the wife already."

The bus came. He kissed her, looked at her for a fraction of a second longer than usual, and then jumped on it quickly.

When Evelyn got back home she asked eagerly, "Did you like him?"

Agnes said hesitantly, "I think you ought to be careful, Evie. You don't know anything about him really, do you?"

"I know he's in love with me." Agnes remained silent. Evelyn's voice had a hysterical note in it. "He loves me enough to be prepared to live with you. What more do you want?"

"Nothing, Evie," her sister answered with quite unaccustomed meekness. "I want you to be happy."

The first blow fell on Thursday morning.

Mr. Pettigrew reached the shop early for once, and confronted her with an expression of extraordinary grimness. Evelyn had been unlucky. The persistent man who had paid a visit before when the shop was shut had come three times between half-past four and six on Wednesday afternoon. Evelyn had no chance to invent a story, even had she been capable of it. Mr. Pettigrew spoke of vipers in his bosom, of deceit and idleness and the modern worker. She was to leave at the end of the week.

The second blow fell at lunchtime.

She was to meet Colin at one o'clock at their teashop, and it was half-past before Evelyn began to understand that he might not be coming. She stayed in the teashop until two o'clock and then wan-

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dered out, looking so pale that the woman in charge of it asked if she would like some brandy.

All sorts of wild thoughts moved through her mind. Perhaps they had agreed to meet at the Tower itself, perhaps he had been called suddenly to do a daytime shift, perhaps he was ill or hurt. Never for a moment did she admit that he might have broken their appointment deliberately.

At last she took a bus to Holloway and found 133 Bossom Street, the address from which he had written the letters that she cherished. It was a small tobacconist's shop, an accommodation address for receiving letters, and they had not seen Mr. Jameson for the past two or three days. At half-past five Evelyn returned to the flat in Balham, hoping that there might be news of him. There was none. Agnes tried to comfort her. "We still have each other," she said. Evelyn shuddered.

When Evelyn left on Friday morning to go to work she met the postman and asked, without hope, if there were any letters for her. There *was* a letter, in the familiar firm, upright hand. Her heart leaped. She tore the letter open on the bus with eager, fumbling fingers, and while she read, the words seemed to jump before her eyes. The words said that they could not meet again for reasons which she would soon understand, and that she should not take the affair too much to heart. The letter ended, "I am very sorry it has to be this way, but when I saw you with your sister I realized that your place is really with her and that, even if the right man turns up, you could never marry and leave her. *I hope you can forget that you ever saw me.*" It was signed simply *Colin.*

At the bookshop a grave Mr. Pettigrew awaited her, and with him a lean, kindly man named Inspector Ballard. Evelyn felt like someone walking through a thick mist as the Inspector explained that last night the jeweler's shop next door had been robbed, and thirty thousand pounds' worth of stones stolen, and that the night watchman had been stunned and gagged. Nor did she understand in the least what was being implied when the Inspector told her of the ingenious method employed, of how down in the basement sufficient of the brickwork in the wall separating the bookseller's storeroom from the disused basement below the jeweler's shop had been removed to allow the thieves to go through, and how from this basement they had avoided the jeweler's burglar alarm system by knocking away the basement ceiling, cutting through the floorboards, and going through into the shop upstairs.

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It was a neat job, the Inspector said almost admiringly, and of course it needed some sort of cooperation. Or deception, he added with his kindly gaze on Evelyn, or deception. Because it took a good many hours' work to go through that wall, and they wouldn't have dared to do it while she was above them because she would have heard, and they couldn't have done it at night because of the watchman making his rounds. It seemed a fair puzzle, the Inspector said, until they discovered from one of the jeweler's assistants that Mr. Pettigrew's shop had been shut from four o'clock onward during the last few days.

A few minutes after four a van had been noticed on at least two occasions drawing up; two men had got out with arms full of books, opened the door of Mr. Pettigrew's shop, and gone in. The books were a blind, of course, although they would have been useful in case of questioning. The men had put in a couple of hours' work on the basement brickwork and then left before the night watchman came on duty, no doubt roughly replacing the brickwork and covering it with a screen of books. It was simple, the Inspector said, when you knew how.

All this time Evelyn said nothing, but simply twisted her hands together around the bag that contained the letter in the firm, upright handwriting. When the Inspector put his questions about where she had been on those days, gently at first, then sharply and finally with downright anger, she simply said that she had gone out each day, she did not know where. It is doubtful, indeed, if any of his questions touched the simple conviction occupying her mind, that she must keep faith with the man who had shown her a glimpse of what life might be like, and had then left her because he thought her place was really with Agnes.

She did not flinch when he showed her the book of photographs, turning the pages slowly and telling her something of the villainous history of this man or that one before asking if she had ever seen them. Not by a flicker of one of her red-rimmed eyelids did she show recognition when he turned to a photograph that showed Colin and Millie Hanslet together and explained that this one's real name was James Johnson, that he called himself Jones or Johns or James or Jameson, that he had been imprisoned more than once for running, with the help of the woman, friendship clubs that were a cloak for blackmail, and that he was often used as a contact man by crooks more important than himself.

She remembered the last words of the letter: *I hope you can forget*

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that you ever saw me, and she let the Inspector turn the page. When the Inspector at last abandoned his questioning for the time being, in desperation at his inability to break down the barrier of her indifference or ignorance, Evelyn Ellis knew what she must do to preserve her soul alive, as she put it at the trial.

She went to the back of the shop to wash her hands, she slipped Jessie out of the drawer into her handbag, she said goodbye calmly to Mr. Pettigrew, and then she went home and shot her sleeping sister Agnes through the head.

When the police came, Evelyn Ellis made a statement, simple and to her quite satisfactory. "I had to do it, you see," she said. "While she was alive I could never get married."

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

A REAL BLAST

by M. EDWARD HOLDEN

The bomber was a nervous man,
  His worried face all creases;
Then, when he dropped the nitro jar,
  He simply went to pieces.

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a *NEW* Hal Johnson story by

JAMES HOLDING

This is probably Hal Johnson's Greatest Case, his Finest Hour. The former homicide sleuth is now a Library Detective, a Biblio-bloodhound, a Searcher of Lost Volumes, a Bounty Hunter (for overdue fines). But this time they are not the ordinary Public Library borrow-books. This time Hal Johnson is tracking down big game . . .

THE SEARCH FOR TAMERLANE

by JAMES HOLDING

I was engaged in my bi-weekly proposal of marriage to Ellen Thomas when I got the call.

"I simply can't understand," I was saying flippantly to Ellen, "why I am so attractive to other women but not to you. Here I am, a man not too old, not too bad-looking, not too immoral, and probably the best library detective in the business, and my chosen bride, Miss Ellen Thomas of the Public Library, treats me as if I were Joe Unknown from Patagonia. Why is this?"

"I like you, Hal," Ellen said, not at all flippantly, "I like you very much indeed. More than I've ever liked another man. But I'm not sure I like you enough to marry you. And spend the rest of my life with you. Even though you *are* a good library detective."

"And a fine homicide detective before that," I said.

She began to eat her pineapple upside-down cake. "Please run that by me again," she said, her tone changing, "that bit about your being so attractive to other women."

We were eating lunch in the cafeteria of the Public Library where we both worked. I took a spoonful of my vanilla ice cream and said with some dignity, "It's quite true."

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"Name one other woman who finds you all that attractive."

"Tessie Troutman," I said. "A very perspicacious waitress at Carmody's Bar and Grill."

"Oh, the blonde with the—" Ellen hesitated. "The one built out to here?"

"The very same. She's willing to marry me at the drop of a hat."

"How do you know? Have you asked her?"

"No. And I won't—not until *you* give me a definite answer. But by her ingratiating manner when she brings me my martinis, I can tell. If I *were* to ask her, she'd swoon with pleasure while saying 'Yes' at the top of her lungs."

"Why?" asked Ellen, scraping industriously at the glutinous remains of her cake. "Because of your overpowering charm?"

"Not at all," I said. "Admittedly, I have no overpowering charm. It's my good looks she fancies. She likes what she sees, you might say."

"What I might say," said Ellen, "is that Tessie—and it's true—has a cast in one eye and sees things slightly out of perspective. Instead, I shall merely be lady-like and tell you that I am honored by your—what is it now?—eighteenth proposal of marriage. And shall deliberate further on my response, with your kind permission."

I groaned. "I don't know why I want to marry you, anyway!"

Ellen, unperturbed, licked her fork daintily. And that's when I saw the cafeteria cashier waving to me and holding up her telephone receiver. I went over to her counter, took the telephone from her, and said into it, "Hal Johnson here."

The voice of our switchboard girl murmured into my ear, "You about finished lunch, Hal?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Two men here to see you. Jerry Coatsworth from the University Library and another one. A cute one."

"Send them to my office and tell them I'll be up in a few minutes. Jerry knows where my office is." Jerry Coatsworth, the assistant librarian at our biggest local university, bowls on my team at the College Club every Thursday night. We're good friends.

I went back to the table where I'd left Ellen. "You can have the rest of my ice cream, baby," I said generously. "I've got another date." I left and went upstairs to my office.

My office is a tiny cubicle behind the Library Director's spacious quarters. It contains only my desk and swivel chair, two visitors' chairs (castoffs from our Reading Room), a filing cabinet, and a

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patterned rug masquerading unconvincingly as a worn but genuine Sarouk.

Jerry and his "cute" friend were occupying the two visitors' chairs when I came in. I had to squeeze past them to reach my desk. "Hi, Jerry," I said, seating myself, "you come to find out how a real man-sized library is run?"

"No way," he replied, grinning. "And not how to bowl a perfect score, either." He said to the man in the other chair, "This is Hal Johnson," and to me, "Shake hands with Perry Kavanaugh, Hal."

I did so, across the desk. Kavanaugh was somewhere in his late twenties, I judged—blond, fresh-faced, with rumpled longish hair and a drooping mustache. He reminded me of the sun-bleached types you see riding horses in the cigarette ads. Cute, all right. He was smiling, but his eyes were anxious-looking and he had been sitting on the edge of his chair even before he leaned forward to shake hands with me.

I sent an inquiring look at Jerry. "What can I do for you?"

"We're in trouble, Hal," Jerry said, "and I promised Mr. Kavanaugh I'd ask you to help us get out of it."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Mr. Kavanaugh," said Jerry, "is the executor of his uncle Ralph's estate. His uncle died a few days ago. His uncle's will leaves a number of his books to us—to the Brightstone University Library—to form the nucleus of a collection of rare books for his alma mater that he hoped would ultimately bear his name. Like the Beinecke Rare Book Library at Yale. You with me so far?"

I nodded. "The books your uncle left to the library were rare books?" I asked Kavanaugh.

"It seems so," he replied. "First editions and so on. I don't know a rare book from Adam's off-ox myself, but Mr. Coatsworth here tells me—"

Jerry broke in, "They're listed and described in the will, Hal, and yes, they'd qualify as rare books. Yes, indeed."

"So where's the trouble?" I asked.

"The trouble is," said Jerry, "that Mr. Kavanaugh gave the books away six months ago."

Kavanaugh flushed in embarrassment. "Before I *knew* they were rare books," he hastened to defend himself. "And before I knew they were to be a legacy to Mr. Coatsworth's library."

Already guessing the answer, I asked, "Who'd you give them to, Mr. Kavanaugh?"

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"To you," Kavanaugh said. "To the Public Library."

"And you want them back?"

"Yes. So I can carry out the provisions of my uncle's will."

Jerry added inelegantly, "And *we* want those books so bad we can taste them!"

I sat back in my chair. "How'd you happen to give them to us, Mr. Kavanaugh?"

He seemed glad of the chance to explain. "My uncle was an old man living here alone in a rented apartment since his retirement. He's been ailing for years, nothing too serious until six months ago when his friends and neighbors and doctor began to worry about his deteriorating health and frequent mental lapses, and his doctor decided he ought to go into a nursing home. I was uncle Ralph's only living relative, so his doctor called me in New York to see if I'd come down here and help him make the move. So I got a leave of absence from my job and came down to do what I could to help him. I got him admitted to Cedar Manor Health Center, helped him move in, and cleaned out his old apartment. Actually, I gave away most of his belongings just to get rid of them."

"Including his books?"

"Right. Seven big cartons of them. I offered them to you—the Public Library—and you seemed happy to take them off my hands." Kavanaugh smoothed his rumpled hair with one hand. "It was only after my uncle's death two days ago, when I came down to make the funeral arrangements, that I discovered I had inadvertently given you the rare books he wanted the Brightstone Library to have."

"Didn't you know he owned some rare books?" I asked. "Hadn't he ever mentioned them to you or told you he was a collector?"

"Never."

"Not even when he knew you were going to clear out his old apartment?"

Kavanaugh shook his head. "He was suffering from advanced arteriosclerosis, Mr. Johnson. He wasn't even aware he was living in a new place when he entered the nursing home. He didn't remember much of anything about himself or his past or—or me, for that matter. So I just went ahead on my own and did what I figured ought to be done—cleared out his apartment, terminated his lease, arranged with his bank to take care of his expenses, and so on."

Jerry said, "He gave you the books by mistake, Hal. So what do you think? Is there a chance you still have them?"

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"Maybe fifty-fifty," I said. "Depends on what they were and what shape they were in when we got them. Any donated books we can't use, we usually sell off at periodic book sales." I turned to Mr. Kavanaugh. "Did we give you a receipt for the books when you donated them?"

"Yes, and at least I was smart enough to save that!" Kavanaugh got it out of his pocket and handed it to me. It was one of our regular receipt forms which merely acknowledged a donation of 193 hardcover and 55 paperback books to the Public Library by Ralph Kavanaugh of the Crest View Apartments. No book titles or anything specific. The receipt was dated the twentieth of the previous October and signed by Mary Cutler, our chief librarian.

"Okay," I said. "May I keep this temporarily?" Kavanaugh nodded. "And I'll need a list of titles—the rare book ones—to check on. The ones mentioned in the will."

Kavanaugh handed me a typed list. "We came prepared," he said. "There are only six."

The list read:

Ulysses by James Joyce. 1922
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain. 1884
Psalterium Americanum by Cotton Mather. 1718 (Autographed)
The Sun Also Rises by Ernest Hermingway. 1926
For Whom the Bell Tolls by Ernest Hemingway. 1940
Tamerlane and Other Poems by A Bostonian. 1827

"Are these the publication dates?" I asked.

"Yes," Jerry said.

"Okay." I stood up. "That's it for now, then. I'll check and let you know how I make out. I can't promise anything, of course. But I'll give it a whirl."

"We sure appreciate it, Hal," said Jerry. "Thanks a million."

Kavanaugh added his thanks to Jerry's.

I waved a deprecatory hand. "I'll be in touch," I said, and they left.

Ten minutes later I had given the whole story to Dr. Forbes, our Director. He listened in silence. At the end of my recital he said, "If we've still got the books, Hal, we'll have to return them to Mr. Kavanaugh. Legally, they're the rightful property of the Brightstone University Library."

"They must be worth a bundle," I ventured, "if they're really rare books, Dr. Forbes. We could be giving up a potential fortune, couldn't we?"

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He smiled. "Yes, but it's a fortune to which the library has no reasonable claim, I'm afraid. Since the books are in our possession, if they still are, only because of a misunderstanding, we must return them to their proper owner. I suggest you consult Mrs. Cutler to see if we still have them."

Mary Cutler, our chief librarian, listened to my story, not in silence, like Dr. Forbes, but with frequent interjections of dismay, regret, and indignation. Books are a passion with her—all books, whether rare or common or neither; she loves and treasures them, and she disliked intensely the idea that her dear Public Library might have to relinquish any of the precious volumes on our shelves to that "stuck-up" University Library across town.

However, she promised to look into the matter at once. And with the aid of our computer, and that of the assistant librarians who are normally charged with sorting, cataloguing, and preparing donated books for circulation or sale, it didn't take her long. By the following afternoon I was ready to report to Mr. Kavanaugh and Jerry Coatsworth.

Their eyes went instantly to the small stack of books on my desk as they settled themselves into my visitors' chairs.

"Hey!" cried Jerry exuberantly. "You found them, Hal!"

"Thank God!" was Kavanaugh's devout comment.

I said, "*Some* of them, Jerry. I found five out of six."

That calmed them down a little. But Kavanaugh exclaimed, "Five out of six is wonderful, Mr. Johnson! Just great and in only one day! Doesn't that mean you may still find the sixth?"

I shook my head. "I'm afraid not. We have no record at all of the missing book, whereas these five here were simple to trace. One of the five, the *Psalterium Americana* by Cotton Mather, had been put in our special section, where the books may be consulted with the librarian's permission here in the library, but not borrowed or taken out of the building. The other four books here were circulating as three-week books in the regular way. Both the Hemingways had been checked out, and I had to collect them from the borrowers this morning."

Kavanaugh said anxiously, "What about the missing one, Mr. Johnson? The one you couldn't trace?"

"It must have been sold at one of our used-book sales. That's all we can figure—that the sorter who went through your uncle's cartons of books decided it was too fragile, or old, or unpopular or something to be of any use to us. It probably went for a buck or two

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to some member of our reading public. As I say, we don't have any record of it, and we don't have it among our uncatalogued books. We looked."

Jerry groaned. "A buck or two!"

Kavanaugh said, "I was a complete damn fool!"

"Anyway," I said, patting the books at my elbow, "our records show these are five of the six rare books you gave us by mistake. I'll need a receipt from you, Mr. Kavanaugh, stating that we have returned them to you." I shoved the books over to him.

"Wait a minute!" Jerry said. "Which book didn't you find? Which one is missing?"

I consulted their list. "This *Tamerlane* thing by A Bostonian," I said.

Jerry groaned again. "Wouldn't you know? This *Tamerlane* 'thing,' as you call it, is the most valuable book of the whole lot! I was planning to make it the centerpiece of our new rare-book collection!" He looked deeply distressed.

I stared at him. So did Mr. Kavanaugh. "What's so special about *Tamerlane?*"

Jerry said, "Only that in 1827 when it was published, a certain famous American writer wasn't well enough known yet to get his name on a book, so he used that pseudonym, 'A Bostonian,' instead. You know who 'A Bostonian' really was?"

"Who?" asked Kavanaugh and I together.

"Edgar Allan Poe," said Jerry in a dismal voice. "The last time one of these *Tamerlane* 'things' was auctioned off, you know how much it fetched?"

"How much?" said Kavanaugh and I, again as one voice.

"A hundred and forty thousand dollars."

Nobody said anything for a minute. Kavanaugh and I were too shocked and Jerry was too depressed, then I pointed to the five books on my desk. "How about these?"

Jerry spread his hands in a belittling gesture. "They're rare books, and they're worth a good deal, of course. But peanuts compared to *Tamerlane.* The Cotton Mather, with his signature on the flyleaf, and the Mark Twain, might go at auction for five thousand apiece. The two Hemingways at maybe two thousand apiece. Ditto for the *Ulysses.*" He paused. "Do you think there's *any* chance of recovering the missing book, Hal?"

"We'll give it another try, but I can't hold out too much hope."

Jerry stared gloomily at his feet. Finally he lifted his head. "Any-

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way, Hal, it's no skin off your nose. You've been great to get these five back and we appreciate it. Mr. Kavanaugh, how about giving Hal his receipt?"

I pushed a form over to Kavanaugh, already filled out and requiring only his signature. While he was groping in his pocket for a pen, I said to Jerry, "I didn't know you were a rare-book buff."

"I'm not. I read up on the six books after we were informed of the contents of the will."

I said, "I can see why the Cotton Mather, with his signature on it, would be a rare book. But what about these others?"

Jerry managed a grin. He took the copy of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* out of the pile and leafed through the book for a minute, then put it down on the desk in front of me, opened to an illustration of an old man. "Look at that fellow," he said.

I looked. Then I did a double-take and looked again. "His fly's open!"

"Right. In this 1884 edition a disgruntled pressman altered the engraving of the illustration so that this guy's fly was open instead of closed. They call this the 'open-fly copy,' and it's worth much more than a correct copy of the edition would be."

I laughed. Kavanaugh said, "You're joking!"

"No, I'm not. The *Ulysses* is a first edition, published in 1922, but the Hemingways are a little unusual." He leafed through the copy of *The Sun Also Rises*. Then, like a proud child playing "show and tell" at kindergarten, he placed the open book in front of Kavanaugh and pointed. "Page 181," he said. "Do you see that word 'stopped'?"

"Yes," Kavanaugh said. "What's rare about that?"

"How is it spelled?"

Kavanaugh looked again. "With three p's!"

Jerry nodded. "Part of the first run had that misspelling before it was caught and corrected. So this uncorrected copy is considered by rare-book buffs to be the genuine first edition." He held up *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. "This is a first edition, 1940. For most of the first run of this one the photographic credit line under Hemingway's picture on the back of the dust jacket was mistakenly omitted. See? Like this copy. Consequently this is more valuable than the corrected first-edition copies with dust jackets."

"Well, well," I said. "You learn something new every day, don't you?"

Kavanaugh handed me my receipt. "What do we do next?" he asked helplessly.

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"Get together with your lawyer," I suggested.

"We tried to," Jerry said, "but he's in Washington at a meeting of the Bar Association. Back Monday."

"You need him," I said to Kavanaugh. "You need him bad. For what you've done by giving those books to us was to dissipate some of the valuable assets of your uncle's estate, of which you are the executor. That's a real no-no to the legal boys. Your lawyer will have to figure out a way to persuade the probate court to accept your uncle's will for probate in spite of the missing assets."

"Can he do it?" Kavanaugh was suddenly downcast.

"I don't know. The receipt we gave you when you donated the books may help. Your recovery of these five books here will be reasonable proof that you gave the rare books to us by mistake. You will probably need an affidavit from us stating that we unknowingly sold the missing book at public sale to an unknown buyer. And you'll certainly have to advertise for the missing book, offering a reward, as reasonable proof that you made all possible efforts to get it back for the legatee."

Jerry wagged his head. "What are you, Hal?" he asked. "A lawyer as well as a cop?"

"No. But I'm surrounded by about a million reference books here."

Kavanaugh sat up and said with more enthusiasm now, "I'll place the ads this afternoon, Mr. Johnson. How much reward shall I offer?"

"Don't name an amount. Just say 'generous reward.' And don't mention rare book, for God's sake. You just want to get the book back for sentimental reasons."

"Okay," Kavanaugh said. He stood up and Jerry followed suit. "And thanks for your help, Mr. Johnson. I don't know what we'd have done without you."

He gathered up his five books and they left, trailing expressions of gratitude as they went.

That was Wednesday. I waited until Friday evening before I called the telephone number listed in Mr. Kavanaugh's advertisements. I draped a handkerchief over the mouthpiece of my telephone.

When he answered, I said through the handkerchief, in as hoarse a voice as I could manage, "Are you the one who's been advertising for a book?"

"Why, yes," said Kavanaugh promptly. "*Tamerlane and Other Poems.* Why do you ask?"

"I've got it," I said.

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A sharp intake of breath and a long moment of silence at the other end of the line told me all I wanted to know. I went on, "How much is the reward?"

Kavanaugh said, "Are you sure you have the book I advertised for?"

"Yep." I said. "So how much is the reward?"

A hesitation. Then Kavanaugh said, "Do you mind telling me who you are? And how you happen to have the book?"

"Never mind that until we get the reward settled. Books are the way I make my living, and I just got lucky when I spotted the one you want."

"Lucky?" Kavanaugh sounded thoroughly bewildered.

"Yeah. The book's worth a lot of money, isn't it? So the reward should be pretty big, shouldn't it?"

"I—hadn't settled on a specific amount. You'll get whatever seems fair, of course."

"How about ten thousand dollars?" I said. "The *Tamerlane* thing is worth that much reward, isn't it?"

"Well, that's pretty steep, don't you think? The book has only a sentimental value to me."

"How about if we talk it over before you decide. Are you free now?"

"Yes, but—"

"Great. Come over to my place. You can make sure my book is the one you want. And we can bargain a little about the reward. I live in apartment twelve at Pennfield Gardens."

"Where's that?" asked Kavanaugh. "I'm pretty much a stranger in town."

"Your cabbie will know the way. I'll look for you in about twenty minutes."

Actually, he made it in seventeen, which is pretty good going. At his knock I opened the front door without turning on the light in the vestibule, so he was inside before he got a good look at my face.

Then he stood stock-still and stared. "Mr. Johnson!" he exclaimed. "Was it *you* who telephoned me about the missing book?"

"Yeah," I said. "Come on in and sit down where we can talk this whole thing over."

He advanced into my living room and, dazed, sat down stiffly in an armchair with his back to my bedroom door. I sat opposite him on the sofa. "I don't understand this at all, Mr. Johnson. Why did

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you call me and pretend to have found my book?"

"Because," I said quietly, "I decided you are a rank amateur and need some professional help."

"Such as yours?"

"Exactly. Such as mine."

"What professional help can you offer me, for God's sake?" asked Kavanaugh a little wildly.

"I can tell you where your missing book is, for starters."

Kavanaugh blinked. "Where?"

"In New York. Either in your safety-deposit box or squirreled away in your home."

He drew a deep breath and ran a hand over his blond hair. "Now I think I understand," he said. "You're trying to blackmail me, aren't you, Mr. Johnson?"

"Call me Hal," I said. "And let's not talk about blackmail. I'd rather consider it a reward for locating your missing book. I think about half of what you get for it at auction would be a fair reward. Say, roughly, seventy thousand dollars, if we can trust Jerry Coatsworth's figure."

He said matter-of-factly, "It probably won't bring that much. Anyway, what makes you think I'll split with you? You can't prove anything against me. I can destroy the book, then it would be merely your word against mine. And whose word do you think the probate court would take?"

I slid in the clincher very gently. "They'd take mine," I said, "unless you had that affidavit from the Public Library that I mentioned to you."

That stopped him for a few seconds. Then, "My lawyer could get around that, Johnson, and you know it as well as I do." But his voice held uncertainty.

"You're dreaming. Your goose is cooked, Kavanaugh, unless you agree to cooperate with me."

"Well . . ." he hesitated. Then he sketched a tight smile. "Do you mind telling me how I gave myself away? Why you think me such an amateur?"

I ticked the points off on my fingers. "First, I found it slightly odd—and thought-provoking—that the only book we couldn't locate was the most valuable one. Second, I didn't believe for a minute that you never knew your uncle owned rare books or had willed them to the Brightstone Library. It seemed much more likely that as his appointed executor under his will, you'd been given a copy

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of the will long ago, with the rare books listed in it. And third, I couldn't quite accept the presumed fact that our people, who sorted your uncle's books, would be dumb enough to discard a book like *Tamerlane* without first checking with our chief librarian."

Kavanaugh said nothing. His expression, by rights, should have been sheepish after my little lecture. Instead he looked thoughtful. I asked him, "Why did you decide to steal your uncle's books anyway? As his only living relative, you're probably the heir to everything he had *except* the books, aren't you?"

He nodded. "Yes. But I knew when I moved him into that nursing home that if he lived for more than a year at those prices, he wouldn't have a nickel left to his name except his Social Security. So I was merely trying to salvage a little bit of his estate for myself before it was too late."

I said, "Well, you had a good idea, Kavanaugh, but you handled it like an amateur." I grinned at him. "Which is where I come in."

With the air of a man asking a very important question, Kavanaugh said, "How many other people have you told about this?"

I gave him my you-must-be-out-of-your-head look. "Cut anybody else in on this sweet little setup? The only chance to get in on some big money I'll ever have? I haven't breathed it to another soul. I'm telling you the truth."

"Good," Kavanaugh said, in what sounded like a relieved tone to me. He put his hand inside his jacket and pulled out a dainty little automatic and pointed it at me.

I was dumfounded.

Kavanaugh stood up, took two paces toward me, and directed the round cold eye of his gun in the general area of my mid-section. No doubt aiming, I thought, to slaughter some of the butterflies that had suddenly come alive there.

I swallowed hard, like taking a big pill without water. "Hey!" I got out in a squeak. "Hold it!"

Kavanaugh's gun hand was trembling, I saw, but not enough to make much difference to me if he pulled the trigger. He said, with a thread of smugness in his voice, "I knew it was you who telephoned me tonight. So I brought this with me in case you got any big ideas." He waggled the gun and sweat broke out on my normally placid brow.

"You knew it was me on the phone?"

"Of course. You're not as professional as you seem to think, Johnson." He was thoroughly enjoying my discomfiture.

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"How did you know it was me?"

"Because you referred to the *Tamerlane* book as the *Tamerlane* 'thing,' just as you did in your office when you discussed it with Coatsworth and me."

I winced. He had a point. An amateur he might be, but he was not a complete fool. I said, "You figure to shoot me? In cold blood? Right now?"

"Why not? Without you around to interfere with my handling of the *Tamerlane* 'thing,' my little scheme could still work."

I looked down at the gun menacing my stomach and said, "If I were you, Kavanaugh, I wouldn't shoot me." I fed him the old cliché. "You'd never get away with it."

He said tauntingly, towering over me, "Why not, Mr. Professional?"

I looked over his shoulder toward my bedroom and said loudly, "Come on in, Jerry. Did you hear it all?"

Startled, Kavanaugh took his eyes off me long enough for me to twist the gun out of his hand, after which I thrust it, none too gently, into *his* stomach.

He gasped.

I said, "You *are* an amateur, Kavanaugh. That looking-over-the-shoulder trick is as old as the hills. And I see you even forgot to take the safety off your gun. Now sit down and listen to me." I emphasized my request with another stiff prod of the gun barrel.

Slowly he backed up and sagged into his chair.

"I deliberately rigged this whole affair tonight," I informed him. "And you're now tied up so tight you better stop squirming or you'll really get hurt."

Kavanaugh said sullenly, "You rigged it?"

I nodded. "I've got our entire conversation on tape. How does that grab you?"

His eyes widened. He lifted his gaze from the gun in my hand to my face.

He didn't say anything, however, so I went on quickly, "I don't intend to use the tape against you, even though the police, your lawyer, the probate judge, and the Brightstone University Library would find it very interesting indeed."

"Why did you tape it then?" he asked.

"An anchor to windward," I answered, "in case you refuse to cooperate."

"I don't believe you taped anything."

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"The mike's under the arm of your chair." He ran his fingers along the underside of his chair arm and found the mike. He still didn't say anything, just sank a little deeper into his chair. I allowed him a silent minute to think things over.

At length he said, "Cooperate. What the hell do you mean, cooperate?" He frowned, the sullen look replaced now by a contemplative one. "What do you want from me, Johnson?"

"The book," I said. "The *Tamerlane*."

"Half the loot isn't enough for you? You want it all, is that it?"

"Who are you to complain?" I said. "After all, you just tried to kill me to hang onto the whole bundle for yourself." I shook the clip out of his automatic and tossed the empty gun into his lap across the few feet separating us. I said, "What I want you to do is to give the book to the Brightstone Library, just as directed in your uncle's will."

That wiped the contemplative look off his face and replaced it with one that was half puzzled, half astonished, and wholly ludicrous. It was all I could do to keep from laughing.

"You're not going to sell the book at auction?"

"No way, buster," I said firmly.

"Then what's in it for you?"

"Look," I said, "Jerry Coatsworth is going to be in charge of the Brightstone new rare-book collection. And Jerry Coatsworth is a friend of mine. I'm not going to stand around and see him cheated out of his rare books by an amateur crook who doesn't know any more about stealing than I do about playing left field for the Cubs. Especially when you try to make *my* library the fall guy in the sketch. Does that answer your question?"

He had the grace to look embarrassed. "Yeah," he murmured. "I guess so."

"So here's what I want you to do. Get the book from wherever you've hidden it. Tell your lawyer and Jerry Coatsworth that some guy who bought it at a local used-book sale saw your ad in the papers and returned it to you for the reward."

"I can't just say 'some guy'," protested Kavanaugh. "And how much reward?"

"How about five hundred dollars? Could you scrape up that much? Not from your uncle's estate, but from your own funds?"

"Sure."

"Okay. Then you write a check for five hundred bucks to the Public Library Building Fund. We're opening a new branch on the

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South Side. And you tell Coatsworth and your lawyer and the probate court that the guy who returned the book wanted to remain anonymous, and asked you to give his reward to the Public Library. You got it?"

Kavanaugh began to perk up. "Sure, I got it, Hal. And if I do it that way, you'll never say anything about what really happened? You'll never—ah—?"

"Never breathe a word?" I gave him my biggest trustworthy grin. "You'll have to hope so, won't you?"

Kavanaugh got out of his chair, put his little gun away, and held out a hand to me. "It's a deal," he promised solemnly. Then he added impulsively, "And a better one than I deserve, Hal. Thank you for making me keep my amateur status."

That night I took Ellen out for dinner, made her swear a sacred oath of secrecy, and told her the whole story. "So you see, Ellen," I finished up, "I'm not only nice-looking but I'm intrepid in the face of danger, loyal to our library, and compassionate to amateurs. Don't you think you should make up your mind to marry me?"

Ellen put down her knife and fork. After a minute she said, "Since you're such a paragon, Hal, I think I ought to confer an honorary degree on you."

"An honorary degree would be nice," I said, pleased. "What degree did you have in mind?"

Ellen dimpled. "How about B.L.S.—Bachelor of Library Science?"

"Bachelor?" I said, regarding her sorrowfully. "You're turning me down again, aren't you? For the eighteenth time."

"Nineteenth," said Ellen. But she reached across the table and squeezed my hand hard, which I took for a hopeful sign.

"Q"

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a *NEW* detective character from

EDWARD D. HOCH

At the end of this case the narrator says, "It was a story out of The Golden Age—like one of those mystery novels Vangie Hope compared it to. Murder at a dinner party . . . I could be home reading about all this!"

Well, most of you are doing just that—reading a gentle spoof of a place not that far away and a time not that long ago . . .

LADY OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It had been months since I last saw Sir Gideon Parrot, and his appearance that afternoon in my Manhattan office was certainly a surprise. His slender, bird-like figure always drew attention, and my secretary announced his arrival with a mixture of wonderment and apprehension.

"He's an old friend," I assured her, and went out to greet him personally. "Gideon! It's good to see you again! Are you in New York for a visit?"

He followed me into the inner office before replying. Then he held out a large cream-colored envelope. "I received this invitation a few days ago."

I took the envelope. "Are you invited to a wedding, Gideon?" But the carefully handwritten card inside was no wedding invitation. It read, *"Sir Gideon Parrot and friend are cordially invited to dinner at the Southampton home of Mrs. Vangie Hope, at 7:30 on Saturday, June 7th."* I looked up at Gideon. "That's tomorrow."

"Indeed it is. Will you accompany me?"

"You don't get many dinner invitations, Gideon. When she says to bring a friend she means a lady friend."

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Gideon brushed that aside with a wave of his hand. "Do you know who Vangie Hope is?"

"She's the actress who's played a number of character parts on Broadway. For the past few years she's conducted an all-night radio program here in New York. Bills herself as the Lady of the Impossible and interviews the usual late-night kooks—witches, seers, flying-saucer nuts. She should be interesting to meet."

"Then you'll join me?" he asked.

I decided I deserved a night out. "Sure, why not?"

The house in Southampton was one of those rambling mansions with turrets and leaded-glass windows, where rumors of weekend orgies among the wealthy always made good newspaper copy. The evening was warm and humid, and my first impression as a dour butler admitted us was relief that the place was air-conditioned.

"Sir Gideon Parrot?" the butler inquired.

"Correct," Gideon said, "but I use the French pronunciation, with the *t* silent."

"This way, please," he said quietly. "Madame is expecting you." He led us to a high-ceilinged room where several people already waited, and announced in a formal manner, "Sir Gideon Parrot and friend, Madame."

A shimmering beauty in a floor-length silver gown rose to greet us. "Thank you, Diener." She approached with a hand held out to each of us. "I have so looked forward to meeting you, Sir Gideon! We've all delighted in your exploits."

"Which exploits are those?" Gideon asked modestly.

"Your solution to the aardvark murders, and the crime in the catacombs, and the killing on the Stamford express! England's loss has been our gain. I tried to contact you last year, to be a guest on my radio show, but you were out of the country."

"I am frequently out of the country."

Her heavily made-up face relaxed into a smile. "Then I'm pleased I was able to reach you for our little dinner party."

One of the men who'd been lounging on the sofa stood up and extended his hand. "Vangie is a bit slow on the introductions. I'm Carter Hope."

I shook his hand and introduced myself. "You're Mrs. Hope's husband?"

"Ex-husband," Vangie corrected. "And now I'm trapped with his name for the rest of my professional career."

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"It's happened before," Gideon murmured. "I believe Agatha Christie had a similar problem."

"Do you read detective stories, Sir Gideon?" she asked.

"If one lives them there is no need to read them."

The others had stood now for introductions. The only other woman present was a girl in her twenties whom I took at first to be the actress' younger sister, though her blonde hair contrasted with Vangie's coal-black tresses. She stood very close to a tall young man in a three-piece suit. When Vangie Hope introduced them I realized my guess about the relationship was mistaken. "This is my lawyer, Martin Brockton, and his new fiancé, Lisa York."

"I've heard a great deal about you," Brockton said to Gideon. "Vangie always finds the most fascinating dinner guests."

One other man remained to be introduced—a portly white-haired chap dressed in black. I guessed him to be a preacher of some sort, and this time I was correct. "This is our minister, the Reverend Joshua Sloane," Vangie said. "I imagine Joshua and Sir Gideon can talk a great deal about crime and punishment."

Joshua Sloane was a man with a twinkle in his eye. "You know you only dredge me up when you want to impress someone, Vangie. Why don't you come by church some Sunday and allow me to impress people?"

"Stop that, Joshua!" she chided. "You're always after me about that! You know I'm up all night doing the show. Tonight is special because the station's running a repeat."

I'd hardly said a word since our arrival, and I looked around for someone to chat with while the butler passed cocktails. I settled on Lisa York, since she was young and attractive. "Have you known Vangie Hope long?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I only met her tonight. Martin is her lawyer and he's been here before, of course. A lovely home, isn't it?"

"Beautiful," I agreed. "You know, you and Vangie could be sisters. You're the same height and coloring, except for the hair."

"This comes out of a bottle," Lisa York confessed. "I used to be a brunette too." She gestured toward a framed photograph of Vangie Hope on the wall. "My hair was like that."

Vangie noticed our interest and said, "That was taken five years ago when I starred in a revival of *Anna Christie*." A little plaque beneath the photo confirmed her words.

"I saw you in that," Lisa York said, as if confessing to some indiscretion. "You made a perfect Anna."

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"Thank you." Vangie Hope gave a little bow, accepting the praise with a casualness that bordered on the regal.

I decided I didn't much like Vangie, and I hoped it wouldn't be too long an evening.

There were seven assembled guests—Gideon and I, Vangie Hope and her ex-husband, her lawyer and his fiancée, and the Reverend Sloane. Eight seemed a more likely number to be invited for dinner, and I guessed there was one late arrival. The thought had barely crossed my mind when the chimes sounded and Diener appeared to answer the door. A moment later he returned to announce, "Mr. Harry Ralston."

The sight of him in the doorway surprised me. Harry Ralston was a writer, and a good one. I'd met him a few times at Manhattan cocktail parties. "Good to see you again, Harry," I said, shaking hands.

He seemed equally surprised by my presence. "I didn't know you were a friend of Vangie's."

"Just met her tonight. I'm here with Sir Gideon Parrot."

"The famous detective?"

Gideon had come over to be introduced. "Fame comes easy these days," he said modestly. "I admired your book on outer space, Mr. Ralston."

"Thank you. Perhaps we can discuss it on Vangie's show sometime."

Now that the party was complete, she summoned us to the dinner table. With only two women, the seating arrangement was far from ideal, but Vangie and Lisa sat at either end, with three men along each side. I was between the hostess and Ralston. Gideon was seated across from me, next to Joshua Sloane.

As the soup was being served, I heard Harry Ralston say to Gideon, "I'd like to write your biography some day."

"It's a long dull story. Murderers are not interesting."

"That's not what I hear."

"What are you working on now?" I asked Ralston.

"A science-fiction novel, about the discovery of a distant deserted planet with geography identical to earth's."

"A fascinating idea."

"I hope my publisher thinks so."

Dinner went well, as the table talk drifted to literature and the arts. The only brief sour note was struck when Carter Hope addressed his former wife during a lull in the conversation. "I under-

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stand, Vangie, that the station isn't renewing the contract for your radio show."

She froze him with a glance. "I suppose that news is all over town."

"Then it's true?"

"True, but unimportant."

"I'll admit I've never heard your show," I said, trying to soften the conversation. "I'm not an all-night person."

"I have hundreds of tapes around the house. I should play one for you."

But as dinner ended she had other things on her mind. Over coffee she came to the point of the evening. "I've asked you all here for a reason. I believe I'm going to be murdered tonight."

There were protests of disbelief from everyone except Carter Hope. "Please, Vangie, not another one of your famous scenes!" He turned to us and said, "When we were still married she used to give dinner parties on all sorts of bizarre pretexts. They were usually confined to imaginative bouts with drugs and sex, but this is something new."

Reverend Sloane came half out of his chair. "Perhaps I should be going."

"Sit down, Joshua. No one's going to defile you." Vangie Hope seemed nervous as she spoke. "This is nothing like that, Carter. I invited you all here because I think one of you wants to murder me. I'm going to give that person an opportunity."

Martin Brockton spoke up. "As your lawyer I must advise against this. What do you hope to gain by it?"

"Gain?" Vangie Hope considered her reply. With the candlelight playing on her face she might have been a girl in her twenties again. "If I am murdered I have Sir Gideon Parrot, the world's greatest detective, on the scene to bring my killer to justice. Maybe that's enough gain for me."

"This is foolishness," Carter Hope declared. "None of us wants to kill you, Vangie. Some of us may not like you very much, but none of us wants to kill you."

"We'll see."

"I have no connection with the police," Gideon informed her.

"I know that."

"Just when is this murder to take place?"

"Very shortly now. I will go up to my room and lock the door."

"How is the killer supposed to get at you?"

"Locked rooms never stop them in mystery novels," Vangie Hope

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replied. "And in a sense this is a mystery novel. Haven't you noticed the skill with which I chose the eight of us?"

We looked at one another, and I for one had no idea what she was getting at. "I am the victim," she continued. "Then we have Sir Gideon Parrot, the great detective, and his Watson."

"I'm hardly a Watson," I grumbled.

"For tonight you are. Then we have the prime suspect, my former husband."

"Vangie, for God's sake—"

"And we have the young lovers, Martin and Lisa." At the opposite end of the table Lisa blushed prettily. "No good mystery novel is complete without them. We even have the least suspected person, don't we, Reverend Sloane?"

"I certainly hope I'm the least suspected!" the minister replied with a chuckle. "But I don't think murder is anything to joke about."

"Where do I fit in?" Harry Ralston asked.

Vangie Hope smiled. "You're the author, of course! Every book must have an author."

I was beginning to think she'd had too much wine. But then she stood and announced she was going to her room. "I will remain there for thirty minutes with the door locked. That should be time enough, if one of you really wants to kill me. Come along, Watson, and escort me to my door."

"Stop this foolishness, Vangie!" Carter Hope demanded once more.

But she left the table and headed for the stairs. I tagged along, not knowing what was expected of me. Upstairs she opened the door of her bedroom and turned to me. "Don't let them come in for thirty minutes. Go back down and sit with them." She gave me a last smile. I turned and started down the stairs as the bedroom door slammed behind me. But Martin Brockton was already on his way up, followed by the others. He went to her door and knocked.

"He knows where her bedroom is," Carter Hope said to me, as if to prove a point.

"Vangie, come out of there," the lawyer demanded.

After a moment's silence her voice came through the door. "Go away, Martin. Leave me alone for thirty minutes."

Brockton stopped knocking and we stood looking at one another. Carter Hope tried the door but it was indeed locked. "Another trick of hers," he said.

"What shall we do?" Lisa asked. "Just wait for her to come out?"

Gideon came up to me and stood silently by my side. Joshua Sloane

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pressed forward. "Perhaps I can talk some sense into her. Vangie! Can you hear me?"

But this time there was no answer from the room.

"Let's go back downstairs and wait," Harry Ralston suggested. "If she said she'd come out in a half hour, she will."

But Brockton had an idea. "Lisa, go downstairs and find one of the servants. Ask them if there's another way into Mrs. Hope's bedroom."

Lisa went off on her mission and Carter Hope tried the doorknob again. "Vangie, come out of there!"

Silence.

Gideon Parrot started opening the other doors in the hallway, looking in on a stairway, a spotless guestroom, a broom closet, a bathroom. Then he came back and we waited some more.

After ten minutes Ralston drifted away, followed by Carter Hope. Joshua Sloane spoke of going home, but decided to wait out the half hour. He went down for his pipe tobacco and then rejoined us. Presently Lisa returned from her mission. "It's spooky down there," she reported. "I couldn't find anyone but Diener the butler. He says this is the only door to her room."

Martin Brockton was staring at her, his forehead creased in a frown. He started to say something but was interrupted by a scream from inside the bedroom.

"Help!" Vangie Hope shouted. "My God, help me! He's killing me!" Then there was the sound of breaking glass.

Brockton and I hit the door together, battering it with our shoulders. It was stout oak, and it took three tries to split it from the frame. By that time the others had come running from downstairs.

I didn't know what to expect—Vangie Hope sprawled lifeless in a pool of blood, or a crazed killer coming through the broken window, or the two of them still struggling.

But the reality was even more of a shock.

The room was empty and undisturbed.

There was no broken glass, no sign of a struggle.

And no Vangie Hope.

"She's gone," Ralston said, stating the obvious.

Martin Brockton cursed. "She can't be gone! We were outside the whole time." He ran to the windows to check them, with Gideon right behind. They were all latched on the inside, and the big panes were unbroken.

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Brockton busied himself searching the closets while Gideon examined the lock on the broken door. The bolt had been set to lock automatically when the door was closed. "She must be here somewhere," the lawyer muttered, continuing his search.

But she wasn't.

We looked under the bed, and in her private bathroom, and even in the oversized laundry hamper.

Vangie Hope, Lady of the Impossible, had joined the impossibilities of so many of her radio guests.

"She's not here," Joshua Sloane concluded. "Will you all join me in a prayer for her?"

"It may be too soon for prayers," Gideon said. He started opening drawers, checked the bedside radio, went to the closets, even lifted the mattress.

"What are you looking for, Gideon?" I asked.

"Something that should be here."

"Something besides Vangie Hope?"

"Something instead of Vangie Hope."

"I'm calling the police," Harry Ralston decided.

"No police," Carter Hope said. "It's just another of her melodramatic tricks. She'll turn up laughing at us. Wait and see."

Suddenly Diener, the butler, appeared in the doorway. "What seems to be the trouble here?"

Brockton whirled around. "Your mistress has disappeared."

"Disappeared? Oh, certainly not! She's dozing in the sunroom downstairs. She may have had a bit too much wine."

We all hurried down, with Gideon Parrot in the lead. The sunroom off the dining area was almost in darkness, but I saw her on the couch and breathed a sigh of relief. However she'd got out of that bedroom, it hadn't been by magic.

Carter Hope switched on the overhead light and Gideon lifted her arm gently to waken her.

A slim dagger was thrust deep beneath her left breast.

"How long has she been dead?" Gideon wondered aloud.

"The body's still warm," I observed. "It must be less than an hour."

"Of course it's less than an hour," Carter Hope said with a scowl. "An hour ago she was sitting at the dinner table with us!"

Harry Ralston was already on the phone to the police.

"How did she get out of the room?" Reverend Sloane asked. "Some of us were up there all the time."

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"We heard breaking glass," I pointed out.

"But no glass in the room was broken!"

While we awaited the police Gideon and I went out through the French doors to the lawn. We walked around the house and he stood looking up at the lighted windows of Vangie Hope's bedroom. "How was it done, Gideon?" I asked.

"Which—the disappearance or the murder?"

"Aren't they the same thing?"

"We have to understand the nature of Vangie Hope's mind. She constructed the dinner party like a detective novel, with—as she carefully pointed out—a victim, a detective and his Watson, a prime suspect, a pair of young lovers, a least suspected person, and an author. Did she really know one of these planned to kill her, or did the murderer simply take advantage of the unexpected opportunity?"

Before I could respond we saw the police cars arriving and we hurried back inside. The formalities of questioning were conducted by a gruff detective sergeant named Nims, who made notes of everything in a labored handwriting. "We don't like this sort of thing in Southampton," he said. He ignored the disappearance of Vangie Hope from her upstairs bedroom and concentrated on the killing itself.

"What do you think of him?" I asked Gideon at one point.

"He won't solve it. He's ignoring the state of Vangie Hope's mind, and that's the key to the puzzle. In a sense she wrote the script for her own murder, and we have to know whom she had in mind for the villain's role."

"The least suspected person?"

Gideon Parrot shook his head. "By calling him that she paradoxically made Joshua Sloane a prime suspect."

"Who else is there? Carter Hope? Martin and Lisa?"

"You forget the writer, Harry Ralston. After all, in any detective novel the ultimate killer is not the fictitious character on the page. The ultimate killer is the author."

At that point Sergeant Nims came looking for us. "They were lifting the body and her wig fell off. Did you know she wore a wig?"

"We'd never met her before tonight," Gideon reminded him. "You should ask her former husband."

Gideon and I followed along as the detective brought Carter Hope to view the body. Oddly enough, Vangie's hair was blonde beneath the dark wig and her face appeared younger without it. Her former

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husband stared down at the body and shrugged. "The lady was an actress, Sergeant. She was forever wearing wigs and changing her appearance."

"The testimony of the others is that she said you'd be the most likely suspect in her murder."

"That was just talk. She was playing her games."

Nims made more of his careful notes. "Do you profit by her death?"

"Of course not! We were divorced! Besides, she was almost broke—worth more dead than alive, with all her insurance."

"One more thing," the detective said. "Wigs always make me suspicious. Is there any doubt that this is really Vangie Hope?"

"Not the slightest. Check her fingerprints if you want. She had a cabaret permit once to sing in a nightclub, and they fingerprinted her."

"Who are her next of kin?"

"Both her parents are dead. There's a sister someplace but I never met her."

"New Orleans," Martin Brockton said, coming in to join the conversation. "An older sister who's quite ill, as I understand it. She's the beneficiary of Vangie's insurance."

Gideon Parrot tugged on my sleeve, and I followed him out of the room. "We've heard enough here. We should follow another line of inquiry."

"How she got out of that locked room?"

"No, no—I've known that for some time."

"What? Then you must know who killed her!"

"I told you earlier they were two separate problems. No, the thought just struck me that when Vangie ran down her list of mystery novel stereotypes who were at the dinner party, she omitted one person—perhaps the most stereotypical of all."

"Who's that?"

"The butler."

We found Diener lurking in the kitchen, nervously smoking a cigarette. "I have some questions," Gideon Parrot said.

"The police already asked them."

"Not these. Where are the rest of the servants?"

"I'm the only one. The dinner was catered. I merely served it."

Gideon nodded. "Now, suppose we learn the whole truth. Diener isn't your real name at all, is it? It's merely the German word for butler."

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He seemed to slump a bit in his chair. His voice changed and he said, "Look, my name is Greg Dunning. I'm an out-of-work actor and I met Vangie while I was making a TV commercial. She offered me fifty bucks to do this butler bit tonight and I took it. I don't know who killed her and I don't care. I hardly knew her."

"All right," Gideon said. "Now tell me this—while you were downstairs, during the thirty minutes Vangie Hope was locked in her bedroom, did you see anyone at all?"

"No. I stayed in the kitchen."

"And you didn't see Vangie before you found her in the sunroom?"

"Of course not! Do you think I killed her?"

"Now I know who killed her," Gideon said simply. "And I know how she escaped from that room."

"Shouldn't you tell Nims?" I suggested.

"Vangie Hope wanted this to be like a mystery novel, and I'll go along with that. We'll assemble everyone in the living room and I will expose the murderer."

We sent Diener, or Dunning, to round them up. He caught Brockton and Lisa at their car, about to depart, and found Ralston helping himself to more wine in the dining room. We didn't have to seek out Reverend Sloane. He found us. "What is this business, Sir Gideon? Diener says you're going to reveal the murderer."

"Correct."

Sergeant Nims came into the room with Carter Hope. Everyone else was there, including the butler.

"What are you trying to do?" Nims asked Gideon. "I'm conducting this investigation."

"The investigation is over. I can tell you what happened."

"You can start by telling us how Vangie got out of that locked bedroom," Brockton said.

"That's as good a starting place as any," Gideon agreed. "And the answer is quite simple. She walked up those stairs, opened her bedroom door, pushed the button on the bolt so it would lock automatically, and then—when my friend turned his back—she pulled the door shut from the outside and disappeared through a door across the hall. I noticed one of them led to a stairway."

Ralston had an objection. "But how was she able to talk to us through the locked door? She answered Brockton when he spoke to her, and later she screamed."

"Vangie told us she had hundreds of radio tapes around the house. What we heard was a specially made tape. The machine was prob-

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ably sound-activated, starting to play when she slammed that door. It was so timed that her answer, and her later scream, came right on cue."

"What about the breaking glass?" I asked.

"That was on the recording too. Obviously glass was meant to be broken, and it was on the tape to make sure we'd hear it. Since the glass wasn't broken we can assume Vangie was meant to break it. She couldn't follow through on the plan because she was dead."

"What plan?"

"To throw a rock through her bedroom window from the yard below, so it would look as if she fell or was pushed through the window."

"Wait a minute, Gideon," I challenged. "Vangie Hope didn't just talk through that door. She specifically answered Martin and called him by name."

Gideon Parrot turned to the young lawyer. "Exactly. And the only way she could have timed the tape to speak his name is if she knew in advance when he would speak and what he would say. In other words, Martin Brockton had to be a willing accomplice to—*grab him, Sergeant!*"

Brockton made his move, but Nims was on top of him, pinning him in his chair.

"Hold it, young fellow! Let's hear the rest of this."

"I didn't kill her!" Brockton shouted. "I didn't!"

"I have more objections, Gideon," I said. "We searched the room and didn't find any tape player."

"You'll remember Brockton searched the closet before the rest of us reached it. He simply hid the small tape machine under his coat and carried it from the room."

"What about the rock that was supposed to have broken the window? We would have seen it, and every mystery reader knows there would be glass *inside* the room. And there was no glass."

"Brockton was the first to rush in, you'll remember. If the window had been broken he would have hidden or pocketed the rock and kicked the larger pieces of glass under the bed. Vangie could have spread other broken glass *outside,* creating the illusion the window was broken from within."

Sergeant Nims was still holding Brockton. "She did this all for a joke?" he asked.

"Oh, no. Vangie Hope had a deadly serious purpose. We've learned about her hard times and the cancellation of her radio show. And

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we've heard about the large insurance policy that made her worth more dead than alive. She planned to cash in by faking her own murder and collecting the insurance."

"For a fake murder you still need a body," Nims protested.

"Yes," Gideon agreed.

"Whose body was she going to use?"

"That should be obvious. The only other woman present is Lisa, and we've already noted her resemblance to Vangie. It wouldn't have been too difficult for a character actress like Vangie to kill Lisa York and take her place among us for a few hours. The insurance money would have been paid to a mythical sister who would have been Vangie in another disguise. I imagine you're the executor of the will, Brockton, so you'd have made sure everything went smoothly."

All eyes had turned to Lisa York, who sat white-faced on the sofa. "I—" She started to speak and then burst into tears.

"Why didn't you tell us you killed her, Lisa?" Gideon asked. "Any jury could see it was self-defense."

While Reverend Sloane tried to comfort Lisa York, Gideon pressed on. "You see this picture that Vangie Hope mentioned earlier? She told us, and the caption confirms it, that the picture shows her as Anna Christie in a revival of the Eugene O'Neill play. But she's a brunette in the picture, as she was tonight with her dark wig. The part of Anna Christie is played as a blonde, following O'Neill's specific stage directions in the printed text of the play. Vangie Hope substituted a different picture for the one that usually hung here, and I asked myself why."

I began to see it now. "Because she looked like Lisa York."

"Exactly! You noticed the resemblance and so did I. If we had seen Vangie with her blonde hair, as in the stage role, the resemblance would have been even more pronounced. That's why she changed the picture."

"I remember she looked younger by candlelight, and when the wig was removed."

Gideon nodded. "Young enough so she could kill Lisa, change clothes with her, and leave her body beneath the broken window. Lisa would become a dead Vangie Hope, and Vangie would become Lisa for the rest of this evening. They were the same size, remember, so the clothes would have fit well enough."

"Wouldn't we have known the difference?" Harry Ralston asked.

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"Vangie was betting we wouldn't. None of us had met Lisa before tonight—except Brockton, who was her accomplice. The only danger was Vangie's ex-husband, and she gambled on fooling him for the necessary few hours. With the uproar of the murder she probably could have pulled it off."

"But Vangie's fingerprints are on file," I reminded him.

"If she'd been found beneath her broken window, stabbed and thrown to her death, no one would have questioned her identity. We saw her enter the bedroom, we heard her speak through the door, we heard the window breaking. We would have seen the body, with black wig and heavy makeup applied after death, and no one would have doubted it was Vangie. I imagine she and Brockton had already established that Lisa had no close relatives to question her sudden disappearance after tonight's events. In fact, Lisa's availability and her resemblance to Vangie probably suggested the whole scheme in the first place. Brockton romanced the girl and even became engaged to her, in order to lure her out here for tonight's murder."

On the sofa Lisa shuddered at his words. Then she began to speak, staring at the floor. "I went downstairs—"

"Where Brockton conveniently sent you, into Vangie's waiting arms," Gideon said. "If he knew which was her bedroom, he probably knew there was no other entrance or exit. He didn't need to send you off to find out."

The girl nodded. "I went downstairs and she came at me with that dagger, covering my mouth before I could scream. We struggled and I killed her. I wanted to tell everyone, but the whole thing was so bizarre I was afraid no one would believe me. So I kept quiet."

I remembered how Brockton had frowned when she reappeared in the upstairs hall. He'd known it was the real Lisa and that something had gone wrong with the plan. "How'd you know it was Lisa who killed Vangie?" I asked Gideon.

"The scheme depended on Vangie killing Lisa and trading places with her to collect the insurance. So I knew Vangie would have sought her out downstairs. And Lisa said she saw the butler but he said he saw no one. Her lie, plus Vangie's plan, added up to Lisa as the killer—even though it was self-defense."

Sergeant Nims stood up. "I'll have to book you, Miss York, and let a grand jury take it from there." He cast a baleful eye on the lawyer. "I'm sure there'll be conspiracy charges placed against you, Mr. Brockton."

Martin turned to Lisa. "I didn't know she meant to go through

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with it. I thought it was all a practical joke."

"We'll see if anyone believes that," Nims said.

Later, riding back to the city, I said to Gideon Parrot, "It was a story out of The Golden Age—like one of those mystery novels Vangie Hope compared it to. Murder at a dinner party, a locked room, impersonations, a plot to collect insurance money—I could be home reading about all this!"

But Gideon Parrot shook his head. "No, you couldn't. They don't write them like this any more."

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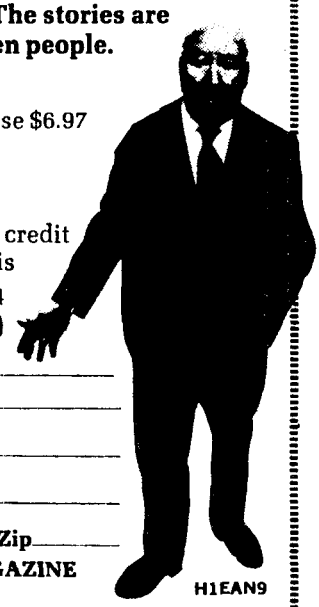

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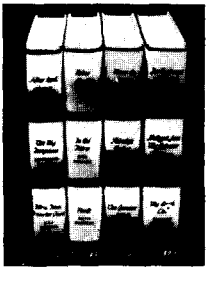

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